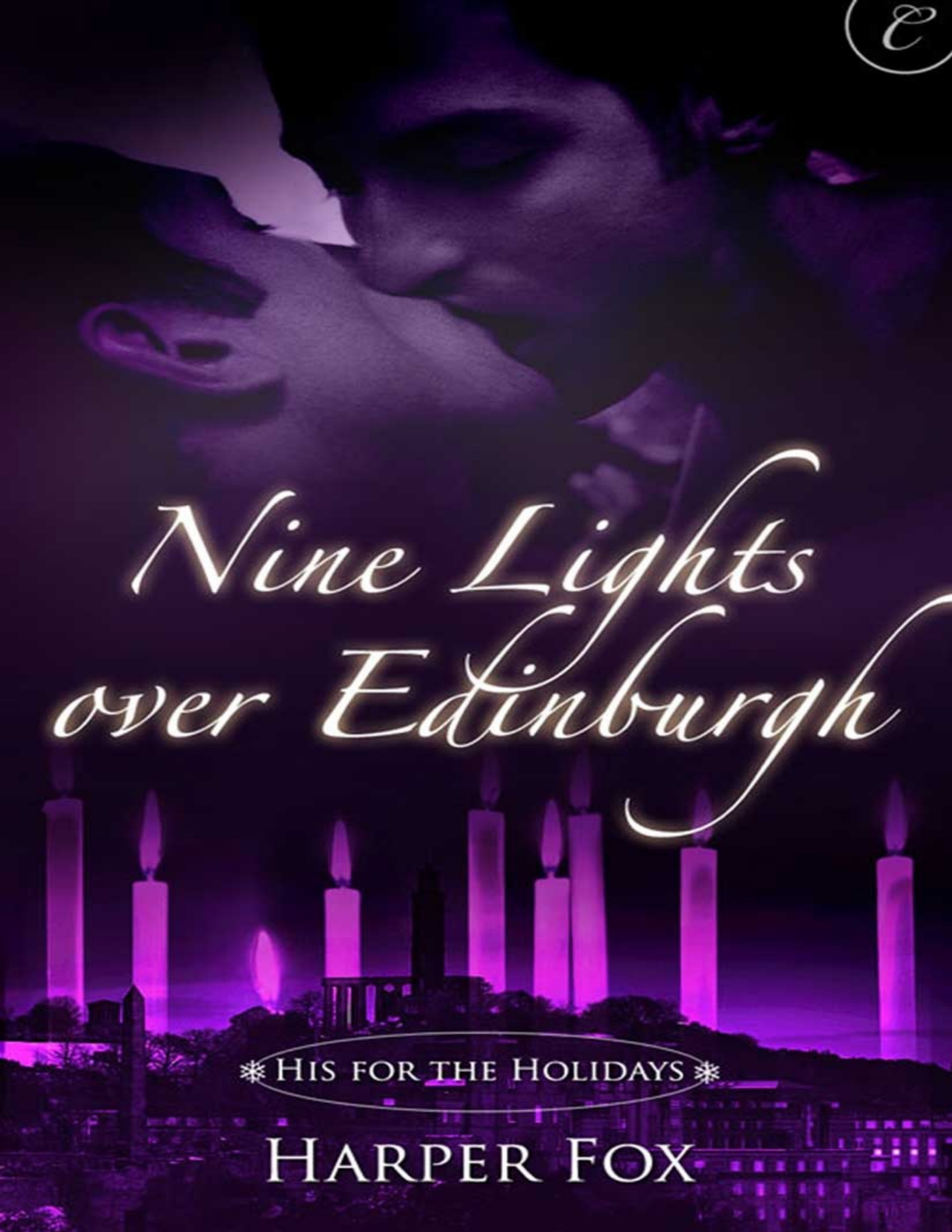

Nine Lights over Edinburgh
His for the Holidays
Harper Fox



Nine Lights Over Edinburgh
By Harper Fox

Detective Inspector James McBride is riding high on the belief that he's about to bust a human-trafficking ring. But just five days before Christmas, his unorthodox methods catch up with him and his world comes crashing down.

McBride tries to concentrate on his new day job as security for the visiting Israeli ambassador. He even starts to feel a renewed sense of self-worth when the leader of the Israeli team, the aristocratic Tobias Leitner, takes a bullet for him in the line of duty. But he can't forget the trafficking case, especially when his investigations result in the kidnapping of his own daughter! McBride has no one to turn to for help—no one, except Toby.

Can these two very different men work together to bring about a holiday miracle —and heal one another's heart in the process?

Dear Reader,

There's something magical about the holiday season, whether you celebrate Christmas or Kwanzaa, Hanukkah or Diwali. The energy and excitement surrounding these holidays charges the air and our emotions, providing a perfect platform for romance and love. So I knew we couldn't let Carina Press's first holiday season pass without celebrating it with a collection of special novella releases.

This holiday season, celebrate with our first collection of invitation-only novellas. We've pulled together eleven talented authors and author duos, all of whom have made their mark in their respective niches, and invited them to transport our readers with holiday delights. In *Naughty and Nice,* join Jaci Burton, Lauren Dane, Megan Hart and Shannon Stacey as they show you both the sensual and sweet sides of the holidays. Visit post-apocalyptic worlds and paranormal beings in an enchanted journey with authors Vivi Andrews, Moira Rogers and Vivian Arend in *Winter Wishes.* And celebrate the beauty of the season in *His for the Holidays* with m/m authors Josh Lanyon, Z.A. Maxfield, Harper Fox and LB Gregg.

Through the talent of their writing and their captivating storytelling, I believe you'll find something in each of these special novellas to put you in the magic of the holiday moment.

Wishing you the happiest of holiday seasons.

~Angela
Executive Editor, Carina Press

www.carinapress.com
www.twitter.com/carinapress
www.facebook.com/carinapress

Dedication

To Jane, whose love of the city inspired me—and to Midge

Contents

Copyright

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Epilogue

About the Author

Prologue

Being this drunk made everything easy. James McBride watched his handsome young partner disappear down the corridor and considered his offer. He took his time over it. No sense of urgency.

"Come on, Jim. If we leave now, I can give you a lift home."

Jim was a new one on McBride. Normally Andrew stuck to *James,* or better still *Inspector.* McBride, while he'd tried to be a good boss and mentor, hadn't encouraged that much familiarity.

Still, it was well past midnight, and rules got bent at office parties. This was the department's informal mid-December bash; nearer to the date there would be an elegant, excruciating police dinner at one of Edinburgh's more glittering venues. McBride wasn't sure which was worse. Keeping a smile on his face for social occasions this year was proving bloody painful. At least the downing of large quantities of alcohol was considered acceptable.

Compulsory, nearly, he thought, setting down the plastic cup of screw-top Lambrusco he'd been using to toast season's greetings to the office girls and admin staff. Andrew's strong, muscular back was still visible. He'd stopped to chat up one of the secretaries en route. And that was more Andrew's style, McBride reflected, pushing unsteadily off the edge of the desk where he'd been perched. There'd been a couple of times over the past month or so when he'd caught a look or a smile that made him wonder, but Andrew was straight. Clean living, almost teetotal. Probably sober enough, even at the end of a night like this, to legally drive them both home.

He'd finished with the girl and was heading for the stairwell that led to the locker rooms. McBride followed him, negotiating the concrete steps with caution. Probably the offer of a lift was all it was…

A lean arm snaked out from behind the first row of lockers. A hand fastened round his arm. Andrew said, "Early Christmas present for you, boss," and dragged him into the shadows.

McBride watched himself in the mirror. He could hardly help it: Andrew had thudded him against the wall opposite the washbasins. What did he see? A pale, dishevelled man of forty, mouth open in shock. McBride searched the image for anything that might have induced lovely Andrew Barclay, rising star of the Harle

Street force, to drop to his knees on the locker-room tiles and begin unfastening his senior officer's belt. Handsome enough once, that reflected man, before the streets and the drink had gone to work on him. Still looking strong, stocky, with sandy hair that would have come in the same red as his five-o'clock shadow if he had one more drop of Aberdeen hill farmer's blood in his veins. But now—just exhausted and lost. Eyes widening in comic shock as competent hands jerked his pants down and a hot mouth closed on his cock.

McBride looked away. Never mind the reflection. All he had was his skin and the moment. He looked at his hands, buried in Andrew's rich brown hair. A right office-party cliché they were making of themselves, weren't they? Might as well have taken a tumble under the superintendent's desk. Through veils of booze and lust, McBride wondered what effect being found sucking off his DI would have on Andrew's career. Why the hell was he risking this? "Andy," he grunted, making a halfhearted effort to push him back. "What the devil are you…"

Andrew's hands clenched his backside. McBride let go a gut-punched cry. Straight or not, Andrew had been practising somewhere. His tongue whipped round the underside of McBride's erection and his lips closed tight, a hard, demanding circle squeezing him from root to tip and back. "Jesus," he whispered, closing his eyes. In the red-tinged darkness, scraps of perception and memory flickered like bats round the Waverley monument at twilight. Dull scents of rubber and sweat, locker-room smells at the end of a long, hard day. The last time he'd been touched like this: Libby, who had put as much good-hearted, hopeless work into their marriage as he had. Nearly a year ago, it must be. McBride had been celibate since their divorce.

Shuddering, he braced his feet and fought not to thrust into Andrew's willing mouth. Libby had done her best, and so had he. Ten years of playing it straight, for the sake of their daughter, for the sake of society, McBride's police job and his thundering Presbyterian minister father. To be queer was a damned aberration. Choking back cries, McBride shoved his aberrant cock down Andy Barclay's throat and tried not to die of the hot, drunken pleasure of it. He'd tried—straight, like his father and every good Bible-thumping Scottish ancestor before him. "God, Andy. Let go! I'm gonna come!"

Andrew sat back. *Prompt,* McBride thought dazedly. Well, fair enough. Five years of getting mentored, protected and trained didn't add up to wanting to swallow; hygienic, Andy, neat and direct in all he did. His hand closed hard where his mouth had been. Tissues appeared from somewhere. The surge to climax seized McBride oddly—snatched him out and away, flung him to a cold distance. Through the glass and into the eyes of the washed-out mirror man, who

could watch himself being jerked proficiently to orgasm but not feel it, not properly. The peak hit and died, dropping him back into his flesh.

Andrew was grinning up at him. McBride, who for many years had stayed alive and employed by knowing how to read a human face, looked back. There was something not quite right about that smile.

McBride let it go. His knees were trying to dissolve, noisy gasps for air racking him. He must have imagined the tiny glint of calculation in Andrew's eyes. What could Andy want of him? Everything McBride had, he'd given him already. "Well," he said shakily. He'd have reached down to help, but Andrew was pushing lithely to his feet, folding the tissues as if they were evidence waiting to be bagged. "That was unexpected. Do you… Should I…"

He shut up. *Can I do you any favours in return?* sounded like a bad line from a *Carry On* film. McBride wasn't used to casual locker-room sex; he didn't know the lingo. Hastily he zipped his trousers. Andrew was dumping the tissues down the bog. *Please don't wash your hands,* McBride thought with indistinct fervour. *Don't make me something that needs to be scrubbed off you.*

Andrew turned as if he'd read the thought. His smile was still in place. He looked for all the world like an uncertain actor struggling to recall his lines. "Er, no," he said, and McBride clearly heard him swallow a habitual *sir.* "I mean, not here. We can go back to mine if you like."

McBride assessed him. "You know what, laddie? Lovely though this has been, I think I'm for my bed."

"Oh. Oh right. Yeah, it's late. I…I'll still drive you."

Halfway down the stairs that led to the underground car park, walking at McBride's side in a good imitation of their usual rapport, Andrew casually asked, "Are you still going out on that Grassmarket op, then?"

McBride gave it thought. Perfectly reasonable question from his partner, wasn't it? In retrospect McBride couldn't think why he hadn't told him about it before. He'd been working solo, but he'd need Andy's help if he got anywhere with the case. "Aye. Sim Carlyle, if I can get my hands on the scaly wee bastard. It's an extortion racket at best. Maybe human trafficking." McBride heard himself with interest. He wasn't sure if the sex or its clinical aftermath had sobered him up so completely. He sounded just as he did on a normal day, coming off shift, chatting to his colleague.

But at no point had he told Andy or anyone else Sim was working out of the Grassmarket.

He pushed the doors to the car park wide. A scent of ice and petrol drifted in off the street. McBride didn't want a lift home from Andy: he wanted suddenly to be in a taxi and on his own. But it was a bollock-shrinking bitch of a night,

and by the time he'd fought with fifty other drunken partygoers for a cab, he'd be frozen to the Harle Street cobbles.

Andy was waiting for him. He looked ordinary to McBride again—his usual handsome, laid-back self. Wondering if he'd hallucinated the last half hour of his life, McBride got into the car.

Chapter One

A cold, unforgiving she-wolf of a city.

Not the parts the tourists saw, though in some places the two worlds coexisted, like the vaults, where population pressure had caused the Old Town builders to dig as far below the earth as they had raised their rickety structures above it. Guides took visitors down there—to gawp at grinding poverty safely set two hundred years in the past, though McBride knew men and women who lived there still.

McBride knew his city. He made his way in the grip of a bitter elation down the cobbled wynds that led between the Grassmarket and Cowgate. The back streets were icy, but he did not slip or fall. He knew the glitter side: Holyrood and the Tattoo, the peerless art galleries and science museums of the Enlightenment. He knew the squatting dwellers of the vaults, the tramps and gangs of disaffected kids who scratched out a troglodyte existence there. Even with a skinful of scotch, he knew how to place his feet on the cobbles to be steady and quiet and sure.

The city was his: he had conquered it. McBride knew the underworld network of clubs that threaded the Grassmarket. Some were for the tourists, a bit of spice and vice to titillate the lads on their stag weekends. And some were much worse. McBride, undercover as Archie Bayne, alcoholic and gambling addict, was a paid-up member of the worst of them. Oh, he knew Auld Reekie, who stank high enough to live up to her name behind these elegant, crumbling Georgian facades. McBride knew—almost—from which of the underworld dens Sim Carlyle was trading in the lives of Romanian women and kids.

Fifteen years on Edinburgh's streets, from constable to DI. Many of them happy, while he was pulling off his act as a heterosexual family man well enough. Team years, those had been, shouldering the harness beside Libby, ticking over like clockwork in his Harle Street squad. Then came his promotion. Better pay, plain clothes and the beginning of working alone. Of thinking too much and drinking too much to drown the thoughts; learning too well how to vanish undercover into night. Of Libby growing tired of playing mistress to a man now married to his job.

McBride emerged from the wynds and onto Castle Street. He snatched a

surfacing breath. Leave all that mess down in the murk with Sim Carlyle. There was his city: a river of lights pouring down over the Royal Mile ridge, and above it all, brooding, visible only by its darkness, the root of the ancient volcano. Six days before Christmas, the cold had come down from the hollow sky at dusk, ringing, reverberant, making McBride's blood sing. His pockets were fat with cash from his poker winnings, his mind alight with all the things he knew. He was better off without his team—without a partner.

Without a family. The courts had granted Libby custody of their ten-year-old daughter, Grace. That was natural and good. McBride had not contested it. He had his girl for weekends and holidays, and that was enough. What kind of life could he give her? If McBride still really cared for anyone, it was the brat. She was staying with him on Christmas night. The money rustling in his pockets was destined, of course, for the police treasury—most of it, anyway; McBride was not as particular as he once had been concerning such niceties. All he was thinking as he turned the corner into Usher Close, was whether an iPod or that absurd Swarovski crystal necklace would go down best as an extravagant, unnecessary stocking filler. Both, maybe, though that would piss off Libby something cruel.

"Hoi, Archie!"

McBride stopped. It took him a second to connect the name with himself: unforgivable, because as long as he was in this cover, he *was* Archie Bayne, responding on the instant. It was thoughts of Grace that had drawn him back into his own skin. He turned around. He knew one of the two men emerging from the alley's shadows well enough, or Archie did, anyway. Fitz Maguire, one of his opponents earlier at the Red Bottle poker club. The other man—just a face across the table, whispering urgently to Maguire—was a stranger. He meant nothing to Archie.

No. Before leaning over Maguire, the stranger had glanced at him. And Archie, too drunk and intrigued by his poker hand, had failed to notice.

"Evening, Fitz," McBride said genially. "Get lost on our way home, did we?"

Maguire took a step into the middle of the wynd. He was a slight man, undermined by decades of bad living. His companion was huskier, but still McBride reckoned he could take the pair of them out. "Aye, maybe," Maguire said. "Good thing my mammy taught me to always ask a copper."

Shit. Somewhere in the distances of his mind, the shattering of his cover resounded. Distinct as breaking a glass. He wasn't afraid. Bitterly angry at his lack of vigilance, but sure he could still walk away. Glue it back together, even, maybe. Fitz might not be sure. McBride put his hands in his pockets, feeling the

cash once more, which was probably the little weasel's motivation. "Not sure I've the pleasure of knowing what you're on about."

"Ah, come on, Detective Sergeant McBride. Drop your poker face. Wilkie here knows it too well."

Wilkie. McBride's good copper's brain, which until he had started shellacking it with Cutty Sark had effortlessly held the names and mug shots of every suspect he'd ever arrested, struggled to retrieve the information. It came at last, with a burst of wrath for his own stupidity. Malcolm bloody Wilkes, a small-time cardsharp and druggie McBride had put away not once over the years, but at least three times. Jesus, what was becoming of him?

Game was up, then. "Malc," he said, shifting onto the balls of his feet. Lothian street coppers didn't get much unarmed combat training, and McBride had seldom had call to use his. His bulk, and an expression of granite severity he could pull down to order, usually did the trick. "I owe you an apology. It's detective inspector now, by the way. What can I do for you, then, gentlemen?"

"For me, ye can drop down deid where you stand, you snoutin' polis bastard. The boss at the Bottle says he'll glass yer ugly puss for ye, if ever you show it down market again."

McBride raised his eyebrows. That was big talk for little Fitzy Maguire, even with Wilkes at his side. Way too big. Head spinning, adrenaline boiling the booze out of his system, McBride glanced behind him. Yes—two more thugs coalesced out of the streetlights, the chilly fog just starting to crown them with halos. If he'd been inclined to run, his retreat had been cut off.

Suddenly that was fine by McBride. He was not a violent man. But how much easier to shed like a tight-fitting skin all his self-disgust and send it lashing outwards! McBride had spikes inside him, poisoned splinters. One was Andy Barclay, who'd uneasily continued to court him since the Christmas party. Another was booze, which was changing from a tool into a need, and a third was his damned new-broom boss who had noticed. Then there was Libby and even McBride's angel, Grace—the pair of them by their existence obliging him not to devolve any further, a constant silent weight on his conscience. "Right," he snarled, taking his hands from his pockets and bunching them into fists. He wheeled slowly, facing each of his assailants in turn. "Which one of you bloody jessies wants it first?"

They hadn't wanted to kill him, or he'd have been dead.

McBride made it to the end of Spital Wynd. Then his left leg gave beneath him, and he crashed into a shop doorway as an alternative to falling into the Lothian Street traffic.

"Hoi," said the whore who was already in occupancy. "Find your own patch, Charlie Bronson."

McBride looked up, grimacing. He could hardly see for blood. He thought his kneecap was dislodged. "Do I look like I'm selling my services, love?"

"You dinnae look fit to *gie* them away." Disdainfully the whore stepped over him, tugged straight her tiny leatherette skirt and resumed her watch of the street.

McBride scrambled a little farther into shelter and promptly recoiled as his hand brushed clammy skin. *Jesus, there's someone else in here*. By the light of his mobile phone—the only asset other than his clothes that Maguire and his mates had left on his body—McBride saw a filthy, bearded face, a hunched-up collection of stick limbs wrapped in a blanket. McBride swore, eloquently and at length. His lips were split and a punch had loosened one molar, but at least he still could speak.

At least he had his phone. He had his job, his status. He was an officer of the law, one of Auld Reekie's finest. And one advantage of carrying on a sporadic, inexplicable affair with his partner was, if he fell afoul of muggers in the night, at least he had someone to call.

Andy's mobile rang and rang. So did his desk phone at the station. The landline at his flat beeped and went to voice mail, and McBride hung up. He could have told him what had happened, just about. But he couldn't make a damned recording on the subject.

His mobile flashed a low-battery screen and switched off. McBride slumped against the wall. The down-and-out beside him grunted and edged closer, malodorously friendly or just seeking his body heat. Alive, then. You couldn't be sure. Nights like this went like a scythe through the doorway dwellers, the railway-arch denizens of McBride's city.

He was washed up between two of them. What was there to distinguish him from either? He could arrest the working girl, he supposed—or the hobo, for vagrancy. He'd never done such a thing in all his fifteen years, even under pressure from his seniors to clean up the Old Town streets, but it might let him skin back over the fence, the divide. If he had his ID card, anyway. He shook with bitter laughter and began to cough.

"Jesus, Bronson. Will you fuck off for me? You're puttin' off the trade."

"Oh. Forgive me, Nell Gwynne…"

She cast a gum-chewing glance over her shoulder. "You need a taxi?"

“Need the fare for one first.” Bracing against the wall, McBride tried to haul himself up. “All right. I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Wait a bit. Cabbie owes me a favour.”

She clicked away, miraculously keeping her stilettos out of the gaps between the cobbles. McBride waited. He couldn’t make it any farther, and he resigned himself to whatever pimp or pickpocket she would bring back with her. Nearly a minute passed in a blur of cold and grinding pain. Then, astounding to McBride as Cinderella’s pumpkin coach, a black cab pulled up and stopped outside the shop door.

“What are you,” he enquired of the working girl, staggering to his feet, “the tart with the heart of gold?”

“Not a bit of it. A tenner next time you see me, or I’ll find out where you live and tell your missus you like to be zipped up and left in a gimp suit.”

Chapter Two

Eight o'clock the next morning, all the dross and the glitter were gone. In their place, plastic and carpet tiles, and Superintendent Lila Stone, looking across her desk at McBride as if the cat had deposited him there. "James," she began, her Oxford accent making McBride's nerves twang. "I can't say I'm not disappointed."

McBride shifted in his chair. He'd come on duty straight from the Royal Infirmary casualty department. He wasn't hurt as badly as he'd thought—a black eye, cracked ribs and a sprained knee the worst of it—but otherwise he couldn't help but concur. He cautiously sipped his black coffee, minding his swollen lip. "Aye, Lila. Me too."

She twitched. It was tiny, subsumed into a tap of the files on her desk, but McBride saw. Proud of her open, nonhierarchical approach to leadership, Stone. Chisel open her heart, and you'd see the words *transparency, accountability* and *equality* carved deep. She liked to call her staff by their first names; invited them to call her by hers. Oddly only McBride accepted the invitation, gravely and as often as he could. She hated it.

She pretty much hated McBride. That much was apparent, if he hadn't already known, in the cold-eyed relish with which she was looking him over. "Would you like to tell me," she asked, viciously screwing her Biro into its plastic top, "exactly what became of you last night?"

I'd rather poke myself in the puss with your paper knife, ma'am. Who the hell had given her one in the shape of a *sgian dubh?* It was the sort of thing a damn tourist would buy. Had she actually bought it for herself? McBride told himself—frequently—he didn't hate her because she was English. No St. Andrew's stickers in his rear windshield. Her narrow-lipped vowels went over his nerves like fingernails on a blackboard when he had a headache; that was all.

"Detective Inspector? I need your report, please."

McBride shook himself. His skull was thumping, not just with the beating he'd received, but a good Cowgate hangover too. He made an effort. "I was working the Carlyle case down at the Grassmarket. Playing poker with a bunch of Fitz Maguire's mates. One of the bastards made me."

"Made you?" Irritably McBride waited for her to quit pretending she didn't

know the term. “You were recognised? Your cover broke?”

“That’s right, Lila.”

A grey morning silence descended. Through Stone’s welcomingly inched-open door, McBride heard laughter, and the rattle and grind of the vending machine. Andy, getting his early fix of tea. Chiming through Andy’s rich Lowland baritone, the voice of the young female officer on transfer from Glasgow. A smart, good-natured lass. Just Andy’s usual type.

“James, you’re one of our finest undercover officers. Please explain to me how you allowed a crony of Fitz Maguire’s to destroy four weeks of man-hours.”

They were my hours. I’m the bloody man; don’t make it sound like I let down the whole Lothian and Borders. But McBride knew he had. His truculence was a frail shield against crippling shame. He clenched his fists in his lap. Sim Carlyle was an evil sod who needed to be stopped. McBride had had a chance and let it go. “I’m sorry, Superintendent,” he said sincerely. “It happened because I was too drunk to notice Malcolm Wilkes in the Red Bottle. I buggered it up.”

“Yes, you did.” Stone opened a file. She sounded less grim—almost cheerful, as if his confession had been all she wanted. “It’s not the first time either, is it?”

McBride blinked. He rather thought it was—or at any rate the first she could know about. Sure, a couple of times Andy’d had to pick up a bit of slack for him, come in and do paperwork McBride had been in no state to handle, loan him a hundred or so to cover a poker debt until he got paid. Still, he didn’t feel like agreeing with her. He opened his mouth to argue, but she was continuing, thoughtfully, running a finger down a page. “You’ve been a marvellous officer, haven’t you, James? One of our best. A consistent clear-up rate way above average for all the years you’ve been with us, though—” she paused and gave McBride a little smile he supposed was meant to be conspiratorial, “—I think we’ll agree my predecessor let you get away with a lot.”

Her predecessor. Amanda Campbell, superintendent, retired. McBride was glad Stone hadn’t mentioned her name, because the day Amanda had announced her intentions to quit and spend her late fifties with her other half, Jennifer, was still painfully fresh in his mind. No open-door policy for Amanda. No first names exchanged—not until you’d worked with her at least ten years. She’d drawn lines of authority no one had ever even thought of crossing. She had dealt with things as a lesbian copper in 1970s Edinburgh that would make Lila’s bleached hair stand on end.

Amanda had been McBride’s friend. “Lila,” he said wearily. “My head hurts, and I’d like to change out of the clothes I got mugged in last night. Do you mind if I ask what we’re talking about here?”

“Not at all. I’m glad you did. I’d have had to bring it up soon anyway. James, can you tell me whether all the drinking you do is necessary to your undercover work? Or do you do it these days because you can’t stop?”

McBride stared at her. She had a pair of cold steel balls on her; he’d give her that. “I beg your pardon?”

“It pains me to say this. Your record is exemplary, but it won’t protect you forever. And it’s your safety I’m worried about—yours and that of anyone who has to work with you. How old are you now?”

“Why don’t you tell me, since that’s my personnel file you’re playing about with there?”

Stone’s eyes glinted behind her reactolight glasses. It was no way to speak to his superior. He wished she’d tell him so. But fear ran under her assertiveness in all his dealings with her, inspiring in him the desire to run rings around her, but also a kind of embarrassed pity. He cleared his throat. “Sorry, ma’am. I turned forty last August. And…as far as the other thing goes, I do what I have to, to get my job done.”

“That’s what concerns me. This time it didn’t get the job done, did it?” She picked up another file, much slimmer than the bible containing the misdeeds of James McBride for the past fifteen years. “I’m afraid I have to tell you, you’ve been under observation. We’ve let you run about after Sim Carlyle, but it’s been a kind of a test, a last chance. And you’ve failed.”

McBride watched the grey carpet tiles at his feet. He wasn’t really there in Stone’s office anymore. He was one tough week away, at a Christmas party, watching his cheery, girl-chasing partner transform into the man who would suck him off in the locker room. He was back in attendance, a wondering ghost, at their few encounters since. Awkward, unconvincing. Andy always seeing to him, reluctant to be touched in return. “Superintendent,” he said dryly, a great arid desert opening up all around him. “Can I please ask you who *we* is?”

“You can, but it’s irrelevant. A wrong focus. I’ve had the cooperation of the department, shall we say. The point is that you need help. And you need to come in off the streets.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t contemplate disciplinary action against you at present, but that’s conditional upon your accepting reassignment. I’m handing Sim Carlyle over to another team, and you…” She peered at him, half eagle, half frightened rabbit, over the top of her glasses. “Two things, James. First you help look after Ambassador Binyamin Zvi when he arrives tomorrow. He’s a fire-breathing Zionist, so even if it’s not street work, it should be plenty dangerous for you.”

“Zvi? The Israeli guy coming in for the Freemason’s Hall summit?”

McBride resisted the urge to hang on to the edge of his chair. He felt as if he were falling. “That’s a constable’s job. Babysitting!”

“I’m not finished. Second…” She extracted a thin sheaf of papers from what McBride assumed was his personal investigative file. He stared in disbelief. The first sheet was a flyer—one he’d seen every day on notice boards around the building. Counselling services, for coppers who couldn’t cope anymore. *And who shouldn’t have been coppers in the first place*, McBride had always privately added, marching past the boards about his business. “Second you will enter the therapy programmes being run for officers addicted to alcohol and gambling. These aren’t suggestions, Detective Inspector. They’re what you need to do to keep your job.”

McBride made a careful track down the corridor to his office. His knee had been efficiently strapped up, and he could more or less put weight on it. If he reached out unobtrusively to the wall from time to time, he thought he would look almost normal. Inconspicuous, anyway, which was all he wanted.

He pushed open his door and went in. There was the same scene he had left the night before: an ordered explosion of files, in which he could always find whatever he wanted, even if nobody else could, a selection of Grace’s artwork ranging from the finger-paint to fairy-princess stages, photos of the unprepossessing brat—poor mite, she took after him—at the zoo, the Waxworks (grinning beside their Christ-awful effigy of Michael Jackson) and atop Arthur’s Seat. There were the mummified remains of the houseplants Libby used to send in with him from her horticultural business. Everything was as he’d left it. The utterly alien light in which he was seeing it must therefore mean the transformation was in him.

McBride slumped into the chair behind his desk. He resisted the urge to sink his face into his hands. The room’s privacy was notional only: since Stone had ordered the HQ refit, walls had turned into glass panels, and each inward-facing office was fully visible from the others. The panels were equipped with blinds, but no one ever wanted to pull them down. Might as well advertise the fact you were beating up a witness or pinching the teaboy’s bum. No, you sat up straight, kept your nose clean and made sure you had nothing to hide.

Well, fuck that. Deliberately McBride took hold of the counselling flyer and information sheets, pinched their top edges between his fingers and thumbs and ripped them in two, top to bottom. Then he carefully lined up the halves and tore

the sheets into quarters, then eighths. Beyond that, the paper resisted him, so he let the bits fall, a festive wee snowstorm for anyone caring to watch.

He tried to take in what had happened. It was bloody serious, he knew. Soon he would be devastated. But something about the end of his fight with Lila Stone brought to mind how last night's battle with Maguire and his mob had concluded. He'd been getting beaten to shit, hadn't he? Temper and basic karate had only carried him so far. Down on the Usher Close cobbles, a boot driving into his gut. Others poised, ready for his face and his groin. Then…it had stopped. At the time McBride had been too sick to register the suddenness with which it had all gone away. He remembered now. He also remembered Fitzy's last words, flung back at him like a well-aimed gobbet of spit: *"Watch yersel', copper! Ye're in deeper waters than ye know. Next time yer troubles might follow ye home!"*

A cold grey fear touched McBride. *Home* meant the shabby flat where he had lived, or camped out, for the past year, not the nice little semi in Corstophine where Libby was bringing up their kid.

Then, if he had been too drunk to remember Malcolm Wilkes, what else might McBride have forgotten? And why had Wilkie and Fitz Maguire run?

He lurched to his feet. There was Andy Barclay, still passing the time of day with the new female transfer. What was she called? Janice, wasn't it? McBride studied the pair of them. They were almost comical, almost a bloody cliché. Andy, tall and handsome, gesturing around, displaying his kingdom; Janice smiling up at him, all soft hair and curves. Adam and Eve at the watercooler. An odd pain passed through McBride. He had never been in any danger of losing his heart to his partner, but what the hell had made him think for one second Andy could ever feel for him the way he did for even this most casual female acquaintance?

Time for the truth. The fragile glass walls hardly rendered it necessary, but if anyone deserved a short, sharp shout… McBride swung his door open wide. "Andy!" he barked and saw with satisfaction that the young man left a good inch of clear air beneath his soles.

"Where were you, then?"

Andrew halted en route to his accustomed chair. After the initial yell, McBride had gestured him into his office courteously enough. "Where was… When, sir?"

Back to sir, *then.* McBride, too stiff to make it to his seat, settled on the edge of the desk. *Sir* was for transparent working days and glass panels. Andrew, obedient to Stone's preferred office policy, had left the door open behind him. "Close that," McBride told him genially. "While you're on, pull the blinds down."

"Um…the blinds?"

"My God, is there an echo in here? Yes, Andy. The blinds and the door. Then come and sit down." McBride waited until his partner had gingerly obeyed. No secrets in Harle Street, except the ones Lila Stone wanted kept herself. "Where were you last night? Around half twelve, is when I'm interested in. Just after I'd got duffed in by Fitz Maguire and three of his lads."

"Yeah, I…I heard. I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

"You *heard?*" McBride ran his hands through his hair. His fingers caught: there was still blood in it. "Right. Yes, I'm okay. A Grassmarket hooker gave me the cab fare to hospital. Tell me, laddie…" He paused, waiting until Andrew's attention was fixed on him with painful intensity. "Tell me. I know things have been weird with us for the past week or so. But…have I got something enormously wrong here? Have you and me not been friends?"

"What?" Andrew almost fell off his chair. McBride almost took pity on him. He'd come in with a mask of smiling bravado, but that had evaporated, the face behind it pale and dismayed. "No, sir! I mean, of course we have. You've been…" He tailed off, as if formulating the thought was making it freshly true for him. "You've been a great boss. The best."

"Then…Andy, why, for the love of God, have you let that little tin-pot dictator pull your strings like this? She set you to watch me, didn't she?"

Andrew swallowed. "She told you?"

"No. *You're* telling me. And that's good, because if you lie to me now, we really are screwed. Why?"

"She's been worried about you. So have I. You must know things have been getting out of control."

"Nice. Also bullshit. Come *on!* You're better than this. More bloody honest, anyway. What did she do to you?"

Releasing an explosive sigh, Andrew leaned forward. He thrust back his fringe. McBride wondered if he recognised in himself the signs of a suspect about to crack under interrogation: certainly McBride had taught him well enough what to look out for. "Jesus. You don't know what she's like."

"I bloody do, you know."

"First of all she said she was lining me up for promotion. I've been waiting ages, James. And my mam needs private nursing now, not that shitty council

place."

"I know she does. I've been recommending you—not because of that. Because you deserve it."

"Don't," Andrew said bitterly. "I don't deserve anything. I fell for it. She told me you were going down, and you were likely to take me with you. That you were old-school police, and I was the new breed, part of an elite task force she's putting together. Then she said I'd be doing you a favour by keeping an eye on you—saving your life, maybe."

"Right. So last night you…"

"I followed you down to the Grassmarket. She'd told me not to interfere, just keep tabs on you. And when you got jumped by Maguire's lot, I…"

"You let it happen."

"Yeah. I thought—anything that scared you off or took you out of action for a bit had to be good for you. Then it looked like they were gonna kill you, so me and Janice scared them off."

"Oh, great. Janice too."

"Yes. Stone's had us working together. She's…"

"Another recruit for Team Lila. All right." Wearily McBride stood. Against the wall there was another desk chair. He took some files and a dead plant off it and sat down, wheeling it a yard or so across the floor so he was face-to-face with his partner. Almost knee to knee. "I understand all this, Andy, just about. But what the *fuck* made you think it was a good idea for us to start shagging?" Andrew, who had gone through a few more shades of pale as McBride closed in, actually squirmed in his seat. "I assume that was under orders too. You poor bastard. It must have been killing you."

"Oh God." Andrew pressed a hand to his mouth and looked at McBride unhappily. "Lila—Superintendent Stone, I mean—she told me to get closer to you. I told her we *were* close. So she asked me what I really knew about you, and I realised there wasn't all that much."

"What? I've told you as much as—"

"As you ever tell anyone. Right. But I've been your partner, James. You do know the first I heard about your bloody divorce was when you asked me to pick you up at your new flat instead of in Corstophine? Anyway, Stone wanted to give the Sim Carlyle job to somebody else, and she reckoned you were holding back in your reports."

"Bloody hell. Don't tell me the pillow talk was her idea."

"No. It was…it was mine. I remembered that story you told me about Lowrie and how much you missed having a friend like that, and…"

McBride froze. He felt blood drain from the surface of his skin. Fitz

Maguire's boot had not taken the air so thoroughly out of his lungs. "Lowrie?" he echoed after a few seconds. "What the hell do you know about Lowrie?"

"Oh Christ, James—what you told me! You were leathered, but not so bad I thought you wouldn't remember. About how he came to your father's Sunday Bible class, and the pair of you used to sneak off into the hills afterwards and—"

"Barclay. Shut up."

"Sorry, sir. I just—"

"No. I really mean it. Shut up." McBride pushed his chair back. That got him near to the door, near enough that he could reach to pull it open. That was good. He wasn't sure he could stand. "Get out of here. Please." From the corner of his eye he saw Andrew get to his feet. He didn't look at him—remained where he was, one hand on the door, waiting.

Andrew came to a halt beside him. His hand twitched, as if he wanted to reach out to McBride's shoulder. "It wasn't killing me," he said quietly. "What we did. It was fake, but…it was no bloody hardship."

"Andrew, get out of this room now. Or something very bad is going to happen."

Chapter Three

A life turned upside down, and a new world to go with it. Stepping into the brilliant December morning outside Harle Street, McBride tried to link himself with the flash, arrogant bastard who had swung his way out of the Red Bottle the night before. But he couldn't make the connection. He skidded on the ice outside the HQ building. Same feet—same shoes and socks too, unfortunately—as had found such firm grip on the wynds.

McBride would have said he hadn't thought about Lowrie in years. Lowrie was a flicker of sunlight, a bright stretch of barley-field freedom in a childhood otherwise narrow and dark. He'd appeared in Pastor McBride's congregation, a pair of defiant blue eyes, dragged there in the wake of his devout family. He and James had got away with edifying nature walks in the hills on those Sunday afternoons, almost a half year's worth, until the pastor's gamekeeping neighbour had caught them through the sights of his rifle, rolling naked together on the banks of Loch Beithe. The pastor didn't believe in corporal punishment, but his son had wished fervently, in the silent months of ostracism that had followed, that the old man would just lash the hide off him and get it out of his system.

Why the hell would McBride have wanted to get pissed and spill his guts to Andrew about that?

Carefully he picked his way down the long slope that led from Harle Street into the city centre. Stone had suggested—by internal email, as if seeing him again would have killed her—he take the day off. McBride had no intention of doing that, but he'd be glad to go home long enough to shower and change. One benefit of his new life was being able to walk to and from work, though he'd scarcely thought about that when he'd left the house in Corstophine, just answering the first accommodation ad he'd seen in the *Lothian Gazette.* No, he wasn't about to sit around his three-room flat and contemplate the shadow that remained of the man he'd been the night before. Or think about Lowrie, for that matter, or Andrew Barclay or an alcohol habit that had escalated to fits of amnesia. And he wasn't about to give up the Sim Carlyle case. Washed, dressed and with a pint of coffee inside him, he would not be such a pushover for Lila Stone.

He turned the corner onto Princes Street and joined the stream of the crowd.

The vast thoroughfare was crowded even at this hour, five days before Christmas. Normally McBride loved Edinburgh on mornings like this. The fantastical architecture, granite and russet sandstone, appeared to best advantage under frosty northern light, solid and shimmering all at once, Gothic gossamer. On such mornings you could almost believe the city was the wealthy, bustling capital depicted in the brochures. Those vagabonds and *Big Issue* vendors as had survived the night had not yet reached their stations, and the boarded-up windows showing that not even the Empress of the North was proof against recession were not so obvious.

McBride slowed up to admire, as he always did, the elegant Georgian bulk of Templeton's. No sale signs or concessions to straitened purses in these windows: the place sailed on, a lonely luxury cruise ship amidst the scrambling dinghies. Doomed, most probably, though McBride hoped not. He never shopped there himself, visiting only to give Grace a high-tea treat or to meet with Libby on neutral ground.

He stopped dead. An American tourist cannoned into him from behind and apologised profusely. "It's all right," McBride said absently and stepped aside into one of the sumptuous revolving-door foyers. Yes, Libby. Meetings here to discuss McBride's child support or Grace's erratic progress at school. McBride remembered a phone call he'd taken in the office the morning before. Libby seldom bothered him at work, but she'd been worried—about what, she wouldn't say, only asking him to come for coffee at the store at…

He glanced at his watch. For once fate had worked to his advantage, putting him here at ten a.m. He'd certainly have forgotten otherwise, adding to Libby's long list of his crimes. He smiled wryly, pushing through the oak doors into the heady mists of the perfume hall. For once in his life he'd be a little early.

Of course she was there and waiting, her slim form erect at a table in the baroque tea hall. As always on first sight of her, McBride remembered why she'd woken him from his years of shocked, cold impotence after Lowrie's forcible expulsion from his life. A true flower of Scotland, his Libby, a green-eyed, sable-haired beauty. A nature as earthy and resilient as her exterior was frail. She was and always had been way too good for him. Picking a route through the elegant forest of gilded chairs, McBride saw her lift a hand in greeting. No matter what they came here to discuss, she usually managed to raise a smile for him.

Her expression changed. For a second McBride was puzzled. Then he

recalled he'd been gathering similar looks all the way up from the ground floor, from security staff and the poor souls employed to squirt perfume samples onto unwilling passersby. The hospital had scrubbed and stitched him, but he supposed his bruising was coming on quite well.

"Jim!" Libby was somehow at his elbow. McBride hadn't even seen her move. Her handbag was abandoned on the table. She seized his arm and marched him back the way she'd come: McBride realised, with a rumble of amusement, she was trying to shield him. "What the devil happened to you?" she hissed, tucking him as far back as he would go into the tea room's shadows. "Did you get hit by a car on the way here? My God, Jimmy—are you *drunk?*"

"Of course not. I—"

"And just what do you think *you're* looking at?"

McBride blinked. But that wasn't aimed at him: Libby was glaring off over his shoulder, her green eyes gone cold as Medusa's. Involuntarily glancing across the room, he saw he'd attracted the attention of a group of highly glossed Edinburgh ladies-who-lunch at a table behind them. That was Libby—reserved the right to tear her kid or her ex into shreds, but God help anyone else who tried. "Leave it, Libs," he said uncomfortably. "It's all right."

"It's damn well not. Aye, I do mean you Armani army cadets over there—just drink your skinny lattes and keep your eyes to yourself."

"Libby, sit *down.*"

She obeyed, breathless, cheeks bright pink. McBride looked at her in admiration. *"Armani army cadets?"*

"Well, the nosy old bints…"

"Cool down, you Glasgow street urchin. However did you get a visa to a civilised nation like Auld Reekie?"

"Shut up. Don't you start on me, James McBride. You're no' funny, and—" she lowered her voice, "and you stink of booze. What's going on?"

"It's from last night. I haven't been home."

"Oh, that'll be right. Well, at least you're honest about it these days."

"No, I mean…"

"Never mind what you mean." The waitress who'd been approaching the table caught Libby's look and veered off. "In a way this makes things easier. Amanda's right—you are totally out of control."

"Wait." McBride leaned forward stiffly, resting his elbows on the spindly table. "You spoke to Amanda? My ex-boss Amanda?"

"Also our child's godmother Amanda, and if you didn't want her to take an interest, you shouldn't have bloody asked her. And she spoke to *me.*"

"Libby—Amanda's retired. She has no idea what's going on at Harle these

days.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised. Unlike you, she doesn’t alienate everybody she meets. People like to talk to her. She knows all about your nighttime jaunts, and your sleazeball friends, and the drinking, and going after that racketeer Sim—”

“Quiet!” McBride glared at her. “What are you on about? What’s easier?”

“Jim, I simply can’t have Gracie exposed to all this. I spoke to my solicitor yesterday, and he says the courts would have no problem agreeing to—” she ground to a halt, shoulders slumping, “—to reduced custody. I don’t want her staying overnight in your flat anymore. And I don’t want her there over Christmas.”

McBride shook his head. He felt as if she’d punched him or chucked her coffee into his lap. “Tell me you’re kidding.”

“No. I’m dead serious. She’s ten years old, and…for some reason she still thinks the sun shines out of your arse. Whatever you say or do, that’s gospel law to her. That’s what *she’s* gonna do.”

“Jesus, Lib. Are you saying I ever did anything in front of her to—”

“No, not deliberately! But it’s only a matter of time. I don’t want to go to the courts with this, Jimmy. Please just agree. It’ll be easier for all of us.”

Not for me. Not for me. McBride tried to rest his pounding head in his hands. But the swelling round his eye and cheek made him flinch from his own touch. Suddenly he saw himself from the outside—a filthy, beaten-up tramp. Suddenly he remembered how a crackhead snitch from his last case had somehow found out his address and waited for him on the step outside his flat one morning last month. “Oh God. At least let her stay on Christmas night.”

“Why?” It was an anguished whisper. McBride knew it well: the sound of a good woman at the end of her rope, fighting tears. “So you can blind her with some cheap, flash present like that…bloody crystal necklace she wants? You of all people should know not to make a wee tart of her, not at her age. And then she comes home and hates me because I have to take it off her.”

The presents might be flash, Libs, McBride briefly wanted to say, *but they’re far from bloody cheap.* He swallowed the words along with the lump in his throat. He knew exactly what she meant. He didn’t have a shred of denial to offer her. Grace had been in the flat having breakfast on the day the junkie snitch had turned up. Often she left before McBride did, letting herself out and trotting off to catch her bus. “All right,” he said hoarsely. “All right.”

“Thank you.” Libby got up. McBride was peripherally aware of her blowing her nose on a napkin. In a minute, once she was gone, he would need to do the same thing. “Look at the big pile of snot you turn me into!” she declared unsteadily. She put out a hand and pushed back his fringe. “And look at the state

of you… Ah, Jim. Are you all right?”

McBride took her wrist, very gently. For a moment the need flashed over him for someone he could hold like that as hard as he wanted, someone he could grasp with all his strength and never hurt. He remembered Lowrie. They had only been sixteen, but both built like young bullocks, tough as the heather and the earth where they lay. “I’ll be fine,” he said. “Best you just go now. Go on, love.”

His flat was on Fettes Row. Quite grand, and more than his salary would have afforded, except he’d taken it more or less derelict and proudly kept it that way. It was a place to lay his head, that was all; a sanctuary.

A badly needed one this morning. Having made the safety of the top step, McBride put his key into the lock and paused for a second, head down. Inside the communal hallway were stairs and a whole range of neighbours he might have to talk to. He needed a moment to gather his strength.

“James?”

He turned round, so fast his bandaged knee almost went out from under him. His heart sank. There on the pavement stood former Superintendent Amanda Campbell, holding his child by the hand. Normally McBride would be delighted to see either—but together and at this time of the morning? Nothing but trouble…

Grace detached her hand from Campbell’s and pattered up the stone steps of McBride’s building, stopping one down from her father. She looked up at him, examining his face. For an instant McBride thought she might react like a normal child and set up a wail, but he need not have worried. Her chin steadied. “Och, McBride. You look like a bulldog that’s swallowed a wasp.”

He studied her. She was in her school uniform, and if she wasn’t crying, she had been at some point that morning. *“Och, McBride?”* he echoed, raising his eyebrows. “You’re spending too much time with your mother. You sound pure Glaswegian.”

“And you sound like an old Embra copper.”

“Embra, eh? Weegie.” A tiny smile flickered at the corner of her mouth. “Glasgae girl,” McBride pursued. “Skinny wee Weegie.”

“Bulldog.”

“Ginger.”

She was going to break any second. McBride watched with pleasure her

struggle to keep a straight face. Then Amanda Campbell came quietly up the steps. “Much as I hate to end this touching family scene, James, Grace was picked up for truancy in the St. James Shopping Centre. The officer recognised her and called me. She’s talking like that because it makes her sound tougher at school and means she gets bullied less.”

The child wheeled on her godmother, paling with mortification. “Aunt Manda! I am *no’* getting—”

“Button your lip, miss.” McBride waited until Grace registered the growl in his voice that meant he was serious. “Amanda, I’m so sorry you were bothered. Why the hell was she playing truant?”

“I spoke to Libby last night. Grace is upset about some changes in your custody access.”

“Aye, but he’s not gonna *do* them!” Both McBride and Amanda turned on the girl, who looked frantically between them. “You’re not gonna do them, are you, Da? I told her you wouldn’t. I want to have Christmas here, and my weekends, and…”

“Gracie. Hush, please.” McBride closed his eyes. No way Embra’s granite bedrock was going to open and swallow him up, but he could pray. Then he looked at his daughter and braced. The one thing that screwed him over with her worse than horrible truths was trying to conceal them. “Listen. I spoke to your mother this morning. She’s right. Things have to change.”

“You…you *agreed?*”

“I’m sorry, love.”

She shoved past him, a white-faced little fury. She was just about big enough to reach the top lock, and McBride watched helplessly while she twisted the keys round, pushed her way inside and slammed the door behind her.

Amanda Campbell regarded the woodwork in silence for a moment. Then she folded her arms and turned to McBride. Her lean, kindly face and wry smile had seen him through plenty of dark days. Libby too. And, these days, the child: Amanda took her role as godmother in deadly earnest. “Well,” she said. “At least this time she left you the keys.”

McBride put the kettle on. Amanda, who knew him too well to comment on the state of his kitchen, left him to it. Spooning instant coffee into mugs, he listened to her in the next room, talking quietly to Grace. He listened to his daughter’s eloquent silence.

He took the coffee through. “You’ve given a great deal of trouble to a very busy person this morning, young lady. I want you to apologise.”

Grace, who had been hunched in an armchair, arms wrapped round her knees, uncoiled like a spring. “She’s no’ busy anymore! You always say she’s got nothing to do since she retired. You always say she should never have gone and left you to deal with that yellow-haired bi—”

“Grace!”

McBride hadn’t meant it to be such a yell. The windows had rattled. That was all right for the likes of Andrew Barclay and other big coppers—not for his stressed-out little girl. Her eyes had opened, wide and scared. “Go to your room,” he said more quietly. Shit, though—her room, the one habitable place in the flat, was full of Christmas presents waiting to be wrapped. “On second thoughts just…go to a different part of this one. I need to talk to Amanda.”

She took herself off meekly. McBride waited till she had settled on a cushion on the floor and switched the TV on, volume low. “God,” he said. “What a wee plague. I’m so sorry, Chief.”

“She’s freaked-out, that’s all. Christmas with Da McBride is a big deal to her.”

“I know, but what can I do? I can’t fight Libby over this. And what’s this about her getting bullied at school?”

“Ah, you know. Some of the little pigs think it’s funny her mam lives in one house and her daddy in another.”

McBride snorted. “That’s rich, coming from a rabble that probably haven’t seen their fathers since the milkman left town. What do I need to do? Come in and kick their arses for them?”

“I wouldn’t. Just make things worse.” Tucking strands of long grey hair behind her ears, Amanda blew on her coffee. “This is scalding, Jim. Is it real milk or…”

“Powdered. Sorry.”

“She’d probably be dealing with it if things were all right at home. Not you and Lib in wedded bliss—she’s got the idea about that—but she doesn’t need custody tussles going on. It’s unsettling.”

“You think I don’t know? But how can I stop Libby—”

“You can’t. As a matter of fact I think Libby’s right. And your new superintendent too, though—” she hesitated, a faint mischief lighting her eyes, “—though I’m sorry to hear you have trouble with her.”

“She’s a copper-bottomed cow.” McBride frowned. “How do you know what Lila’s been up to?”

“Well, not from Grace. I do still have friends at Harle Street, you know. I

heard she wants to take you off your undercover work. I'm very sorry. But if you're off the streets, and hopefully in less hot water, Libby won't have to fret about Grace coming to see you."

"Jesus, Amanda. You hate Lila Stone. She's one of the reasons you quit."

"Retired. I'm not ready for transparency and politics any more than you are, but unlike you I had the bloody sense to get out. And…by the way, not that it's any of your business, but Jennifer and I are finding *plenty* to do."

"Oh God." McBride rolled his eyes. "Spare me. All right, I'll think about it. What'll I do with madam, then?"

"I'll drop her back off at her school. I'll talk to her headmaster too."

"Poor wee bugger. I've got a day off today if I want it—can I not keep her home?"

"That's right. Reward her when she acts up. That'll mean she'll never do it again."

McBride groaned. "Why don't these things occur to me? Am I a rotten father, Chief?"

"No more than I'm your chief anymore. Come on, Jim. Try to work with things as they are now. She's a good kid, and even that yellow-haired…person at HQ might actually have your best interests at heart."

"She hasn't got a heart. She's got a—Oh, Gracie." He turned. The child had come across the room like a shadow and inserted herself into the circle of his arm. She was nearly too big to be hauled onto his lap like a sack of potatoes, but he did so anyway, feeling her stiffen at first, then melt entirely, burrowing her face into his shoulder.

"You're no' a bad father, Da. Don't go round saying that, or she'll cut off the custody altogether."

He stroked her hair. "Who's *she?* The cat's mother?"

"No. My mother. Sorry, Da. I'm sorry, Aunt Manda."

"That's all right." McBride kissed the top of her head. Over it he looked at his former boss, who returned his gaze gravely, as if he were a case whose outcome she could not predict. "It'll be okay," he said, to which of them he wasn't sure. "It'll be different now. You'll see."

Staying at home had been a bad idea. McBride knew, as the four-o'clock twilight came down, he should either have gone back to the office to wrestle the dragons there or taken charge of his daughter himself. Why had he automatically let

Amanda step into the breach for him, escorting the child back to school, seeing the headmaster? Because he was so used to accepting Chief Campbell's word as law, he thought—and then, more honestly, *No. Because that's women's work.*

McBride, sitting at his kitchen table, shook his head. He stared into the golden circle of his whisky tumbler. He tried his best but remained pretty much —what was the word?—unreconstructed. Did he resent Stone more because she was female? No, that was ridiculous. He'd worked happily for Amanda for most of his career.

But Amanda was different. Even her sexuality had set her apart. Except as a colleague and a friend, she was out of bounds, out of the question.

And if McBride thought about it, he had been out of the question for the straight female staff in the office. Not because he'd been married, although that had been the shield he'd raised when faced with the occasional attack. Because Andrew had pulled his memories of Lowrie to the surface, and McBride knew they'd never been very far down. Because he was…

He stopped short of the word. He wasn't even sure which one he'd have used if he'd got there. His father's cold, clinical *homosexual*, when the old man had finally deigned to speak to him again? *"Do you believe you are a homosexual, James?"* Not by the time the pastor had finished with him, no. By then McBride hadn't believed he was anything sexual at all. And there was a universe, a sexual revolution, between that old hill-farmer world and the brave young things of Edinburgh who proudly called themselves *gay.*

McBride got up restlessly and carried his drink to the window. Across the street, in the elegant housefronts that mirrored his, lights were appearing, women and kids returning from school. Whatever word he used, how grotesquely unfair to Libby his life with her had been! How stupidly cruel to himself…

He downed the scotch in one, unthinking. "Damn," he whispered and poured another from the bottle on the sill. Unless Grace was visiting, there was always a selection within reach. He'd only meant to hold the first one, as a prop, an object of contemplation. He'd packed in smoking on the day he'd heard Grace's fresh baby lungs open wide in their first newborn wail, and his hands still missed their occupation. Yes, he should have gone back to Harle Street. Taking time to think was almost always a mistake with him.

He glanced at his watch. It wasn't too late. He could take a graveyard shift. Sort through his paperwork, make sure the officers who'd been given Carlyle's case had everything they needed. Briefly he imagined how it would be if he accepted Lila's decree—dropped his undercover work, went to counselling, cleaned up his act. Libby wasn't a hard-liner. Far from it: she wanted Grace to have a father, if McBride didn't keep making it impossible. It could all be pretty

easy, he thought, absently knocking back his second double. He'd have equal custody back in no time.

And wouldn't it be grand too, to round off his career with the capture of Sim Carlyle? Sure, he'd blown his cover at the Red Bottle, but Sim had plenty of other hangouts. Just standing here, watching his city's lights begin to shine, feeling them somehow in his veins, McBride had a dozen ideas of how to go about it. A bit of disguise, a new angle…

He refilled his glass. Excitement shot through him, hard and sweet. Lila wouldn't like it, but why should she know? He'd trot in obediently and do his day job, but the city nights would be his own, just as they always had been. He could smell the frost in the air: feel, as if they were laid out through the streets like a pattern of veins, bright red and pulsing, the lines he could follow to find Sim. He could start straightaway—a little reconnaissance, a prowl around the edges of the night. Shrugging into his coat, forgetting his kid and his good intentions as if they had never been, McBride set off into the streets.

Chapter Four

The Freemason's Hall was beautiful. McBride's father had been admitted to the Scottish Rite, and McBride had childhood memories of being shown around the vast oak-panelled space, with its stained-glass depictions of Old Testament stories and its scent of beeswax and books. McBride wasn't sure why the pastor had brought him here, unless it was in some vague hope his boy would absorb Masonic tendencies, the desire for social responsibility, secrecy and ritual, from the air. The visits had stopped after Lowrie.

Yes, a lovely place. And about as unsuitable for a high-security conference as any building in Edinburgh McBride could imagine. There were a hundred windows, shadowed galleries, staircases that wound mysteriously from one set of reading niches to the next. It was practically indefensible, unless you had a small army. McBride paced the top-level gallery, assessing where on its parquet-floored length he would position the men in the tiny team he'd been assigned. All right, he had gone out on his clandestine hunt last night, but he was doing his best to take this new day job seriously too. His head ached almost as much as his injured leg. If he thought too hard, he would drop back into the rainy Livingstone wasteland where another of his snitches had shown him a pair of shallow graves. That was where Carlyle had got rid of his last Romanian girl, one who'd made the mistake of trying to break out of his sex-trade operation. Not just the girl. The second grave held her kid, the snitch had said.

McBride leaned his elbows on the polished balustrade. Blindly he looked down into the light-bannered space before him. There were two Edinburghs, he thought, and he was poised awkwardly between them. A foot in each camp, and as likely to plunge into the abyss as find his place on either side. He wanted to be good—for Libby, for Grace—but how the hell could he abandon the night? He needed to be sure about the graves before he went to Lila Stone with his evidence. He just needed more time.

"Morning, boss."

McBride jumped. He had to pull himself together. If Andrew Barclay, with his big feet and lack of talent for concealment, could appear at his elbow like this, a hostile gunman would have no trouble. "Morning," he said cautiously. He had no idea what terms he and his partner were on. If Andrew was even his

partner anymore—he hadn't been assigned to the Zvi op, as far as McBride knew. "Wasn't expecting to see you here. Has Lila got no elite-task-force stuff for you today?"

The instant the sarcasm was out, he was ashamed. Andrew blushed hard. "She might have done," he said, leaning on the balustrade too. "Only I lost my rag with her a bit yesterday after you left. I didn't have to do the things she told me, but…she didn't have to play me like that either, the manipulative cow."

McBride gave a low whistle. "Is that what you told her?"

"Not exactly. She'd be wearing my bollocks for earrings. As it was, I said enough to get myself busted down to this gig. I'm sorry, James."

McBride wasn't sure what he was apologising for. Turning up here, maybe, and obliging McBride to work with him, which he couldn't imagine doing—not the way they used to, side by side, shoulder to shoulder. Maybe it was for picking up a drunken confession of McBride's and using it to bait his honey trap. McBride almost smiled. Although handsome as ever, Andrew this morning looked so ordinary, so…*straight*, McBride couldn't imagine how for one minute he could have been deceived.

He didn't know if he forgave him. And there was room for forgiveness on Andrew's part too. Uncomfortably McBride thought about all the times he'd asked—no, ordered—the lad to cover for him. The undone paperwork, the loans… He shook himself. Best to lay it aside if he could. "Forget it," he said. "What are we gonna do about this place, then? Zvi's gonna be like a goldfish in a barrel."

Andrew glanced at him, evidently relieved to have the conversation turn back to work. "Aye. I did try to tell her, but she wasn't having any."

"What—Lila chose this place? What's wrong with the International Conference Centre?"

"Doesn't show off her nation's full historical glories, does it? She's convinced this place is safe. You know, I heard…"

"What?"

"That she was one. A Mason, I mean."

McBride pressed his lips together. *Surely you mean a Masonette,* he wanted to say. But he was beginning to see why every female in his life, apart from a ten-year-old and a lesbian, was at odds with him. He settled for, "Wouldn't surprise me," in a tone as neutral as he could manage.

"No, me neither. She has the look of a grand mufti."

McBride snorted helplessly. "Jesus, Andy. You're meant to be the new breed. You'll never get back into Stone's Scottish SWAT with cracks like that." He straightened. "Come on. Let's scope out this goldfish bowl and see if we

can’t keep Lila’s ambassador alive for her.”

They did their survey efficiently, but it took longer than McBride had expected. He wound up at their start point sooner than Andrew, aware that at every stage where he had expected to see him—across the hall on the same gallery level, checking out the mirroring pattern of staircases—he had not been there. It wasn’t Andrew’s fault. Not McBride’s either, for being always a few steps ahead or behind. They just couldn’t read each other anymore.

It didn’t take a lot, McBride knew, to destroy a partnership’s rapport. Andrew didn’t meet his eyes, coming to join him by the balustrade again, and the silence between them was heavy. “It doesn’t look too bad,” McBride offered. “I don’t have enough men really, but with you here too, and Zvi’s people…”

The outer doors of the hallway rattled and flew open. Instinctively McBride spun in the direction of the noise. Here came the ambassador’s security cortege, as if summoned by his words, in full parade order: six of them, sweeping in pairs into the hall. McBride watched, partly in admiration, partly amusement, as they took up positions around the room, so precisely you could have measured equal distance between them from the tip of one polished leather toe to the next. They were quietly and immaculately suited. All toned, neat, dark, they looked like a band of brother princes. He wondered what they’d make of his team, his motley Celts and Vikings.

A seventh man entered. Unlike the rest, his head was down. He crossed the floor slowly, as if lost in thought. Roughly in the centre of the hall, where the stained glass turned the light sapphire, he stopped and looked up.

His gaze locked to McBride’s. There was no drama in the moment. In fact it felt quite ordinary. As if he had got up that morning, come to the Freemason’s Hall and carried out his duties, purely for the purpose of ending up in this gallery in time to meet a pair of brown eyes.

They were warm and full of questions. McBride felt his lips part as if he would answer—his heart, which despite his abuses normally thudded along stolidly about its business, lurch to a faster tempo. His palms dampened on the gallery rail. And still it didn’t feel awkward to be staring at a stranger. He said softly to Andrew, “Who the hell’s that?”

It took Andrew a moment to answer, as if somehow he could be unsure who McBride meant or had somehow failed to notice him. “Who, the guy on his own there? That’s Zvi’s security chief. Leitner, I think he’s called. He’s Mossad.”

“Mossad?” McBride echoed. The man in the hall had pushed his hands into his pockets, tipped his head to one side. The blue light falling on his aristocratic face brought out his skin’s warm olive tone. His hair and his eyelashes caught and split the weird radiance, black as raven’s feathers blowing in the wind on Holyrood’s hills. McBride drew a deep breath. He had no idea what was making his head spin. Carefully he smoothed a tremor from his voice. “What’s a Mossad agent doing on a milk run like this?”

Andrew had come to lean close beside him. McBride felt him shrug and suppressed a flinch. He didn’t want to be touched or distracted. “Maybe the same thing we are,” Andrew said. “I heard he was involved in some god-awful fuckup in the West Bank. Some kind of hostage rescue that backfired. His partner was killed.”

“What—so he got busted down to a gig like this, as you’d put it?”

“Aye, maybe. I heard they wanted him out of the way for a bit while the investigation went on.”

McBride stopped listening. The Mossad agent—*Leitner,* McBride said to himself, his mind trying out the delicate, exotic name—had begun to smile. It was very faint, but undeniable. McBride’s pulse geared up another notch. A strange heat sprang up in him, beginning in his gut, an inch or so under his navel, spreading to his solar plexus and a point behind his breastbone. His throat. Oh God, a sweet spot just up and back from his balls, halfway to his…

“James? Are you all right?”

“What? Yeah.” McBride drew a deep breath and glanced at Andrew. When he looked down again, Leitner had turned away. *Just as well.* He would have to stay here, pressed safely against the balustrade, until he was sure this stranger’s bizarre effect on him hadn’t culminated in a noticeable erection. “I’m fine.”

“Doesn’t look like he’s any happier with this place than we are.”

McBride watched Leitner make his way back towards the door. Now their eye contact was broken, McBride was at a loss to know what had seemed so extraordinary about him. He was tall and broad shouldered and his suit had probably cost more than McBride’s flat, but he was just a man. A tired one, from the look of him, and anxious. McBride listened while he gathered his men around him. Snatches of what he assumed was Hebrew drifted up to him. He didn’t need to understand it to know what was bothering Leitner. He nodded in amusement as the agent gestured to the exact same places from which McBride was afraid an attack could come. “Aye. For the right reasons. Will we get the chance to brief with them?”

“Lila wants us here two hours before kickoff tonight. They’ll be here as well. Oh, er, James—one more thing…”

McBride straightened. He looked at Andrew in suspicion. “What?”

“Plain clothes tonight is…traditional. She wants us to blend in with the hall’s hospitality staff.”

“Andrew, the staff here wear—”

“Full kilt and shoulder cloak. Yes.”

“Oh, you are fucking *kidding* me.”

“Afraid not. She’s very keen. Hired the very best from McCalls. Done her research too—got you your McBride green-and-blue, from the Clanranald—”

“Thank you. I *know* what my clan tartan is.” It was a decent idea to have him and his lads looking like harmless prats instead of plainclothes coppers, but he couldn’t help but wonder if Lila had come up with it as a subtle form of punishment. He’d worn his tartans twice in his life before—once at his wedding and once when some of the Harle Street police had been asked to march with the Tattoo. Both occasions had been torture. “Where am I supposed to hang my bloody gun?”

Andrew chuckled. “Well, that’s up to you. But I gather she’s ordering weskits and jackets long enough to hide a shoulder harness.”

McBride sank his face into his hands. “Brilliant. The woman’s thought of everything.”

The changing rooms were crowded. McBride supposed he should be grateful they’d been assigned facilities separate from those of the staff, the horde of little cocktail shakers heading off about their duties in full fake ceremonial, a uniform tartan never dreamed of by the Highland chiefs. If Lila was making some kind of point to him about becoming part of a team again, she couldn’t have chosen a more direct way to do it. From his position on the bench, struggling with his shoelaces, McBride could see parts of his colleagues seldom exposed in cultures that did not include a skirt in their national dress. He repressed a smile. It was enough to put a man off. And that would be grand, wouldn’t it—cure him, straighten him out and send him home to Libby with a hard-on.

At least his gear was authentic. Standing, McBride adjusted the heavy, groin-shielding sporran to its proper place and settled the hang of the cloak over his shoulder. All that was missing was the *sgian dubh* in his sock. Unlike Lila Stone, he had a real one, a gift from his grandfather, which looked like it might still have Sassenach blood on its blade. But these were meant to be peace talks, and all parties were forbidden the display of conspicuous weaponry. Ironic, McBride

thought, since he was carrying a Walther P99 in his holster. Ironic, that the few times he'd ever had to carry a weapon on duty were at peace talks.

"Boss?" McBride looked up. There was Andrew, who'd fought his way to the full-length mirror and was struggling with his cloak brooch. He'd already spiked himself in the thumb, from the look of things. "Are you any hand at fastening these wee bastards?"

McBride was, but more from dealing with Grace's nappy pins and little frocks over the years. He slid Andrew's pin home with the absentminded tenderness he'd brought to those tasks, then tidied the ruffles of his shirt and stepped back, patting him once on the shoulders. Andrew looked the real deal, of course. Resplendent in his Barclay yellow and black. Poster boy for the Lothians tourist board…

Tears in his eyes. McBride frowned. "What the devil is wrong with you?"

"I've been thinking, James. What I did—it was terrible."

"Ssh." McBride glanced over his shoulder. "I told you, forget about it. And don't get blood on that shirt, for God's sake, or Lila will lose her deposit." He watched while Andrew sucked his thumb in a gesture he would once have found distracting and which now left him cold. *Christ, maybe I am cured.* "Here, shift over. Let's have a look at these two fine Highland warriors."

And that was no good. The mirror, his reflection in it with Andrew's, recalled straightaway the Harle Street locker room on the night of the party. He saw Andrew redden and was glad he was too tired to manage a blush for himself. "It wasn't all fake," Andrew whispered. "I…I did like it, James. If you want to go on…"

McBride tried to imagine it. He couldn't. And when he tried to recall it, all he could see in his mind's eye was Agent Leitner. He blinked in surprise. Had he even been thinking of him? "Don't be so bloody stupid," he growled. "You're a lot of things, Andrew, but queer isn't one of them. Now, we've got bigger fish to fry than our own tonight, so pull yourself together. How's Janice?"

Clouds lifted from Andrew's brow. McBride let himself cease paying attention while the boy detailed Sergeant Janice Dee's perfections. There was just a chance that one day he and Andrew might find their way back to normality, to balance. Distractedly he checked the draw on his weapon, that the edge of the cloak wouldn't hinder it. Best warn the others about that too. Best give them the team talk, even though it had been so long he could barely remember what to say.

He let Andrew roll to a halt, then called his men around him. Lila had only given him a handful, but at least they were good—Royston and Davies, both top marksmen, and McKay, eerily talented at picking out a wrong face in a crowd.

Three others, all fine lads. He told them all the usual things. That part was easy. To look out for the venue's weak points and for one another. To mind what Zvi's men had said. To make sure no part of their evening's draperies was going to foul up their pull, and to keep their weapons otherwise well concealed. They listened dutifully. They laughed at McBride's dutiful effort at a joke.

And they were polite, which made his blood run cold. Anyone who'd ever stood in front of a squad room full of Edinburgh coppers knew he need not expect to be treated with kid gloves. McBride wondered how much they had heard about why he was here with them tonight. What Lila had told them.

Then, did he really need to look to her for blame? McBride tried to remember the last time he'd sat down with his colleagues. When had he last gone with them to the pub after work? Ever since his divorce, he'd grabbed every chance that had come up for him to be a lone wolf. He realised with a shock that these men weren't his friends anymore. They would obey him because he'd been put in charge, but that was all.

A loneliness seized him. Finishing the briefing, McBride reproved himself. He couldn't have it both ways, could he? Not the cameraderie and the teamwork *and* the dark freedom of the streets. Once they were done here, that was where he was headed. His little snitch had found another link, a better one, between those shallow graves and Sim Carlyle. He could do it. He knew it would be worth the price.

Chapter Five

The doors of the conference hall were open, the early arrivals filtering through. Dinner suits and djellabas, a composite rustle of German, Arabic, Hebrew and Auld Reekie filling the air. From his position by the marble statue of Sir Walter Scott, McBride watched the stream. Diplomats and politicians, that was all. No one walking too fast or too slow, no sweaty brows or overly dilated pupils.

Nevertheless he wasn't happy. He glanced ruefully up at Sir Walter, envying him his stony calm. Where was the unease coming from? He'd barely slept for the past few days, what with his extracurricular activities and the raw-nerved tension they left in their wake. This was just street-fear, he tried to persuade himself. Nothing for him to worry about in this haven of chandeliers, dazzling white tablecloths and champagne glasses adroitly balanced on silver trays. McBride resisted the urge to filch one from a passing waiter, though he couldn't half have used a drink. He'd drawn the line at carrying a tray himself to enhance his cover—another of Lila Stone's suggestions, and he wondered if she'd sat up long the night before thinking up further small twists of the knife.

Speak of the devil. There she was, halfway up the magnificent staircase that connected the foyer with the conference chamber. Locked in debate, it looked like, with Agent Leitner.

McBride hid a smile. If ever a haughty woman had met her match… The pair of them looked like two cats facing off. Pedigree versus moggy, McBride added for his own entertainment, watching. Lila's fur was practically on end. After a moment she turned on her heel and stalked up the rest of the red-carpet flight into the hall.

Leitner did not look as if he'd scored a victory. He just looked bloody lonely. He went to lean on the marble banister, the incoming crowds parting round him. For a moment he lowered his head.

He lost his partner, McBride remembered suddenly. He hadn't properly taken it in when Andrew had first told him: had been too busy falling under the spell—bizarre and mercifully short-lived—of whatever he thought he'd seen in Leitner's brown eyes. Well, McBride could look at him with perfect disenchantment, but it didn't mean he wasn't sorry. He had no idea how Leitner had felt about his partner, but to lose even an imperfect one like Andrew Barclay

would break McBride's heart.

He made his way up the steps. When he was four or five away, Leitner turned, his movement casual but edged. Cop to cop, McBride recognised it. A stranger entering your personal space. But there was more to it than that, wasn't there? Leitner wasn't just a cop. He was Israeli secret service.

And he was ready to jump out of his skin. McBride halted one step down. "What do you think of our choice of venue, then?"

Leitner stared at him. First McBride wondered if he didn't speak English—not that, as far as he knew, Lila counted Hebrew among her accomplishments. Then he wondered why on earth he'd thought this man could be in need of human sympathy. There wasn't a flicker of expression on his elegant face. McBride became intensely aware of himself. He and all his men, even the ones who could carry their tartans, had looked like clowns coming out to meet their exquisitely tailored Israeli counterparts. "*Our* choice?" Leitner echoed. "Did you select this?"

"No, not a bit of it. Figure of speech."

"Good. Because you look like a sensible man, Detective Inspector McBride, even if you are wearing a dress. This venue is grossly inadequate, a triumph of arrogance over experience. I cannot defend Zvi in here."

Nothing wrong with the English, then. McBride drew himself up, resisting the impulse to straighten his skirt. "You have the advantage of me."

"Tobias Leitner." Leitner put out a hand. Taking it, McBride noticed vividly how his own square Scottish one locked into it. How Leitner's tanned grip warmed his. Strange—he hadn't noticed he was cold. "My second has spoken to your sergeant Andrew Barclay. We agree the positioning of your men. Clearly you've identified the same points of weakness we have."

"Aye. The back staircases, the eastern windows and the library stairs that connect the galleries." For a moment McBride was too amused by Leitner's rendition of Andrew's name—*Bar Clay,* two separate words, as if that prosaic Lowland soul were biblical royalty—to realise their hands were still joined. He stepped back, letting go. "Between my team and yours, we can just about cover it, but…"

"But there are gaps. I explained this to your superintendent."

"Who told you any risks were negligible and more than outweighed by the splendour and historical significance of the venue."

"In almost those exact words." Leitner looked around him, then turned his attention back to McBride. His dark gaze was as steady as the clasp of his hand, and McBride saw kindling in it the subtle fires that had touched him at their first encounter. "Is she a fool?"

“No. That’s the strange thing. But she’s trying to bring police work into the twenty-first century, and—” McBride cleared his throat, which had gone dry, “—Edinburgh’s not ready for it.”

Leitner smiled. It was just a flicker, bittersweet, full of amusement and pain. “Well, I can assure you, neither is Jerusalem. We had better go, McBride. Zvi is due any minute.”

McBride struggled for focus. The conference had droned on into its fourth hour. At this rate he’d miss the appointment with his snitch down in Cowgate. Restlessness tugged at him, as if he had mice in his bones. He wanted to be out there in the star-shivered night. He wanted the hot wildness of a quart of scotch inside him.

Unexpectedly, what he also wanted was to be laid out somewhere getting fucked. The thought struck him with such force that he twitched and stifled a gasp. He analysed it. Yes, *getting*, not giving. Not with Libby, then. Nor with Andrew, whose cock hadn’t really been in it any more than his heart. Christ, the last time he’d done that had been with Lowrie, and a right dog’s breakfast they’d made of it, though their clumsy attempt had been sweet to McBride, vivid in his memory still.

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, making what felt like his fifty-ninth visual check of the gallery above him. What the hell was wrong with him tonight? Ever since Libby had left him—oh, further back than that, if he were honest—his libido had been a well-damped fire, flaring on command to let him perform his marital duties and not much more. Certainly it never distracted him with sexual fantasies during an op. He was tired. Defences down. He wasn’t as young as he used to be, couldn’t skip night after night of sleep like a kid in his twenties.

Sixtieth check. This damn conference had to end soon. Even the ambassadors looked bored. Drawing deep breaths, McBride dismissed all thoughts but those of the moment. Sixty-first…

He froze. Something in the fall of light and shadow on the gallery was wrong. Or perhaps not wrong, but just a fraction different. The back of McBride’s neck prickled. Andrew was in place up there. If anything was off, he would see it. A glance from McBride would alert him. They had no trouble, he and his partner, in catching each other’s eye across distance. Stepping forward, McBride looked for him.

His place was empty. McBride scanned the gallery, pulse picking up in his veins. Finally he saw him—way off, right at the far end of the hall, gazing down like the lord of the bloody glen at the diplomats. Probably dreaming about Janice Dee, not that McBride could really talk.

Quietly he eased back out of the hall. There weren't many places other than the Tattoo where he could wander round dressed like Robert the Bruce and not be noticed, but this was one of them: none of the staff or the Israeli guards dotted about the staircases cast him a second glance as he made his way up to the gallery. No sense in alerting anyone yet. Lila would never forgive him a false alarm.

Which was what it would have been. Emerging on the second level, McBride released a breath. He was getting bloody jumpy in his old age, that was all. The staircase and the doorway were empty. Except for…

Shit. A lean figure, moving at speed, disappearing between one pillar and the next. Straight into one of the blind spots you'd have to be blind to miss. Nobody had any business up here except Leitner's men and his own. McBride set out in pursuit. He didn't have time to stop and try to alert his partner, but no matter: Andrew had to have seen him, picked up the unusual movement. They would converge at about the right place.

It would have to be soon. Only a sniper would head with such purpose for the end of the gallery. McBride knew this in the way any good copper would who had learned over the years to think like a criminal himself: if *he* were going to knock off Ambassador Zvi, that was the spot he would pick.

He rounded a corner and stopped, staring down the barrel of a gun. Black eyes returned his gaze frigidly. Two steady hands held the weapon at his chest. McBride had time to observe the silencer: it was huge, elaborate.

He would die with a pop that barely disturbed the air. *Oh, Grace,* he thought. A pang went through him, a sorrow, sharper than he'd imagined it would be if ever this came to pass. Somewhere between Lowrie's embrace on the banks of Loch Beithe and this night, he had lost his love of life for its own sake. But he wasn't ready to leave it. Not yet…

The tiny sound came. McBride scarcely noticed. In the instant before it—the grunt, the champagne-cork explosion—a shape had come between him and the gunman. McBride was still standing, and someone had crashed to the ground at his feet. He understood this in retrospect, perceptions running backwards as his hands dealt with the physics of the moment, unholstering his Walther.

He was a decent marksman, but that hardly mattered anymore. The gunman was four feet away from him and taking aim again. McBride's life—his flawed, precious life—had just been saved. He couldn't waste that. He whipped up the

P99 and fired point-blank.

His gun had no silencer. In the hall below, all hell broke loose. The effect was instantaneous. Lurching to the rail, McBride saw Zvi being dragged down to the parquet by one of the Israeli guards. He saw which of the other diplomats and staff were also diving. And he saw who stayed upright, reaching for weapons that had got in because Lila wouldn't even have her guests subjected to the indignity of a search. Christ, they'd been infiltrated. McBride counted ten or so, in strategic places round the table and the hall. Frantically he tried to distinguish the good from the bad, hostiles from security. They all looked the bloody same.

Only behaviour distinguished them. McBride got his first clue when another silenced shot scorched past his ear and buried itself in the venerable panelling behind him. Fine; that cleared things up. Ducking behind the balustrade, he took out the man in the hallway below with cool dispassion. Once battle was declared, what did it matter? There was Andrew, in the wrong place, but alive—for the time being, anyway; oblivious to the sniper taking aim on him from the gallery opposite, who in his turn was briefly oblivious to McBride. The Walther jumped in his hands again. Another good shot, and he could see the Israeli men getting their act together, finding cover and their targets, with the exception of…

Where was Leitner? Who the hell had saved his life?

Oh God. Two questions with one answer. As the gun battle started below, McBride scrabbled round and saw the hunched figure in the shadows behind him. Leitner, one hand pressed to his left shoulder, was reaching with the other for his pistol. His head was down, his face a grim blank. There was blood everywhere.

McBride grabbed the gun for him. "Christ on a boat, Leitner! What have you done?" Leitner took the weapon in a red-streaked grip, and McBride, getting close enough, seized him by the armpits and dragged him into the shelter of the stairwell. "Here. Stay still, stay still. Let me look at that."

"Why…why is he on a boat?"

"What?" McBride propped Leitner against the wall. He looked for a second into his beautiful, shock-grey face, then turned his attentions to the fist he had clenched against his shoulder. "Let go. Let me see."

"Christ. On a…"

"Oh, for fuck's sake. It's an expression." McBride prised apart Leitner's fingers and bore his hand down. Blood surged immediately. The fine charcoal jacket of his suit was soaked through with it—the shirt beneath too. Unceremoniously McBride ripped open Leitner's tie and shoved his clothes back far enough to see the bullet wound, a raw red-black hole punched in the satiny

skin. “That missed your heart by three inches, you bloody nutcase. What did you do it for?”

“I saw your partner wasn’t in place. I saw you look for him.” Leitner grimaced as McBride tore off his cloak, bundled it up and pressed it to the gaping hole. “Oh, that hurts.”

“I know. Hold it in place, nice and tight. You don’t believe in him, anyway, do you?”

“Who—your partner?”

“No. Christ.” It was a ploy of distraction only, something to take Leitner’s mind off passing out from the pain. “On a boat or otherwise.”

“I believe he existed, just not…in his divinity. I’m not a religious Jew—I don’t believe in anyone’s divinity. Do you?”

“Not right now, no.” McBride shook his head in wonder at a man who would pursue such debate with a pouring shoulder wound and crossfire raging over his head. He had to get help for him or find him at least a better hiding place than this, until the battle was lost or won downstairs.

No. Too late. Footsteps scraped at the foot of the spiral below him. Leitner seized McBride’s shirtfront, leaving scarlet stains. “Leave me! Get out of here!”

“Shut up. Ssh.” McBride clamped a hand to his mouth. The man climbing the stairs wasn’t one of Zvi’s or Lila Stone’s. That left only a hunter, coming after his missing colleague. He put his arms round Leitner and hauled him close, dragging him farther into the shadows. “You’ve got to be quiet.”

Leitner was rigid with the effort to silence himself, face contorted and dampening with sweat. “This is how my partner died,” he rasped out. “He was alone.”

“Well, you’re not. And you’re not gonna die. Shut up.”

Leitner’s head jerked back, his eyes glazing, filling with long distances. “Avrom! Oh, Avi…”

“Leitner! That’s all over. You have to hang on.”

The desolate gaze found focus and came back to him. After a moment Leitner struggled round and buried his face on McBride’s shoulder, stifling a cry. “That’s it,” McBride whispered, pressing a hand to the back of his head. “Hang on. Not going to let anybody hurt you now.”

And that was a bloody stupid promise. McBride didn’t know why he had made it. He didn’t know why, clutching this stranger in the middle of a firefight, a predator closing in on him, he felt calmer and more real than he had done in months. The Walther had five left in the clip. Shifting Leitner in his arms so that he was shielding him, with his bulk and his ancestral tartans, McBride took a good, steady aim down the stairwell.

Another gun barked. McBride knew it well—Andrew's, the weapon that sang next to his on the firing range. The gunman making his way up the stairs jerked and fell. Andrew, his face blanched with fear, stepped straight over the body, lurched his way up the rest of the spiral and stumbled out onto the gallery. "James! Jimmy!"

"I'm here, you great clown. Did we win down there?" Andrew stood staring at him, long enough for McBride to guess that they had. The rattle of crossfire had ceased. "Then get a bloody ambulance!"

"I…I will. Oh my God, James. Is he alive? He saved you. I saw him save you. I…"

"Barclay."

"Yes." He pulled his mobile phone, to McBride's pained amusement, out of his sporran. "Jesus, James. Lila's never gonna get her money back on that kilt now."

Chapter Six

At half six the following morning, McBride stopped on the pavement outside the Royal Victoria Hospital. A faint promise of daylight was gathering between the streetlight halos. He had made the appointment with his Grassmarket snitch after all, although the poor bastard had been ready to jump out of his skin by the time McBride arrived at their rendezvous, out of breath, traces of blood still on his shirtfront. And the meet had been well worth it. The snitch, a loose satellite of Carlyle's, had heard more women were being smuggled into Leith aboard a cargo ship Carlyle had used before. Driven by his drug habit, McBride's snitch had taken his chances and hidden in a dockside warehouse with a camera. McBride, who could no longer call on police funds to pay for information, had fully appreciated the irony of handing over poker winnings from one of Carlyle's dens so the trembling little man could go and buy drugs from another: half now, the rest when he was sure the evidence was good.

McBride breathed on his numb hands to warm them, stamping his feet. Then he went into the hospital reception. The girl at the desk told him Tobias Leitner was out of surgery and doing well, but visitors' hours didn't start until ten. McBride flashed his badge and looked severe and a moment later was in the lift on his way to the third floor.

The hothouse atmosphere almost put him to sleep before he got there. Cold air condensed on his skin and clothes, dampening them. Padding down the long corridor towards the postsurgical unit, he yawned, pushing his fingers back through his fringe. He'd stopped off at home for a shower and a change of clothes, but he hadn't checked a mirror. He hadn't thought about it yet, but suddenly he wanted to be presentable.

Leitner's room was guarded. McBride saw a couple of Zvi's men and came to a halt in the corridor until they recognised him and stood down. He nodded to them, cautiously friendly. After a moment they returned the gesture, one of them reaching to push open the door for him. Well, they'd walked through the same fire the night before. They looked almost as weary as McBride felt.

Not so, Agent Leitner. Propped on pillows, smiling and chatting to a young male nurse who looked ready to die for him, Leitner was apparently prince of postsurgery. The unit was one of the hospital's few modern ones; through the

glass walls that divided its cubicles, McBride could see a small squadron of staff checking out the new arrival, making sure their aristocratic charge was safe.

He could see the attraction. Leitner wore his bandages like a sash of honour. He looked like an exotic general in his desert tent, wounded but still in command. McBride felt—for the first time since he was sixteen or so—a flicker of shyness. Then Leitner saw him, and his bright grin burned off his imperious air like sunshine on Edinburgh mist. “McBride!” he said. “Are you all right? What are you doing here?”

“Well, I was passing. I thought I’d stop off and check you were okay.”

“I am. I’ve had… Oh, wait one moment.” He turned to the nurse still standing by his bed. “Peter. My friend could use some coffee. Could you possibly…” McBride cringed. He waited for Peter to inform this beautiful foreign despot this was an NHS hospital, and the nursing staff were not waiters. But the boy only nodded and headed for the door, almost bowing on his way out. “I’ve had surgery to remove the bullet, and a transfusion,” Leitner went on, indicating a chair by the bed. “And…you know, McBride, I think I still look healthier than you. Sit down. What the hell have you been doing?”

McBride considered. He had a whole range of lies and smoke screens prepared to cover up his work on Sim Carlyle. But he was very tired. Sitting by Leitner’s side felt like coming to rest. The nurse brought his coffee in and set it respectfully on the bedside table. It was just from the vending machine, but the lad had put it on a tray and from somewhere or other had produced a digestive biscuit. “Thanks,” McBride said, sternly repressing a chuckle. “I’ve been out all night on a case. Bloke called Carlyle. Just a wee junkie and dealer, but he’s running a trafficking ring—women and kids from Romania, mostly, for the sex trade. I’ve…” McBride hesitated. For the hundredth time since he’d surfaced from the Grassmarket that morning, he checked his coat’s inside pocket for the digital photo cards his snitch had handed him. He’d only had time to glance at them on his laptop before he came out, but he knew they would do. Carlyle with the captain of the cargo liner, a cluster of bewildered-looking women clinging to one another in the background. Carlyle handing cash to a customs official on the Leith docks. “I’ve got enough on him now.”

“And…that’s what you did last night, after helping fight off a Hamas death squad?”

“Is that who they were? Yeah, I saw you safe here, and…”

“Your boss must be more negligent and stupid than I thought.”

McBride frowned. Leitner was watching him with a dark-eyed displeasure that made him glad not to be its target. It was strange, to have someone indignant for him. “Well, she’s all that. But to be fair to her, she didn’t know about Carlyle.

She took me off the case last week, and I just…"

"You carried on anyway."

"Yes. I was so close. Leitner, why…" Leaning forward, McBride rested his elbows on his knees. He clenched his hands together until the knuckles whitened. "Why did you stop a bullet for me last night? You don't even know me."

A warm touch found his shoulder. McBride tried to look up but found he couldn't pull his gaze off the scuffed lino floor. His throat was tight and sore, his eyes oddly hot. "Why?" Leitner asked. His voice was very gentle. "Didn't you want me to?"

"Well, you could have chosen better men to save."

"Listen, McBride." The touch tightened briefly, then lifted away, leaving a cool patch. "I'm only on secondment to the Israeli police. You've probably heard that I normally work for Mossad. A few months ago in Jerusalem, the West Bank, my team was sent to rescue some hostages. No negotiation—we don't negotiate—just a clean sweep-through. And my partner—"

"The one you called out for last night. Avrom. Avi."

"Yes. My partner and my lover. He was shot. It was…the work of a moment. I didn't believe in it, for many weeks. Perhaps not even until last night, when I saw you at gunpoint, and…I couldn't bear to see another good man go down."

"Oh. I'm sorry." The word *lover* hit McBride on the rebound, like a ricochet. He sat up. "Oh. You were…together?" *Awful, McBride,* he admonished. So awkward. He felt as if his hands and feet were too big for him. "I *am* sorry," he repeated lamely. "But it's still no reason to jump in front of a bullet for a stranger. And I'm…very far from good."

"If it's any consolation, I only meant to push you out of the way."

"Well, next time just shout."

"All right. As for your goodness or otherwise…"

McBride never found out what he had been going to say. He was looking at McBride with an unearned affection, as if somehow he was good enough—good enough for Leitner, anyway. Those strange appreciative fires—damped down by the hospital neon, but unsettling as hell—were back. McBride jumped hard as the door clicked, admitting Lila Stone on a cold breeze.

"Oh. Detective Inspector. May I ask what you're doing here?"

At what point had Leitner taken his hand? McBride had rested his on the blanket. He couldn't remember when Leitner's had come down to cover it. Leitner was watching Lila with interest, as if he couldn't quite work out her species. Unhurriedly he lifted his hand. "The DI was good enough to call in on his way to work, Superintendent. How are you this morning?"

McBride turned. She hadn't sounded at all like herself. Now he came to look, she didn't look well either. Brittle and nervous. "Well, that's what I came to find out—how *you* are, that is, Agent Leitner. McBride, as you know, I gave you and your team this morning off, in consequence of last night's…"

"Cock-up?" Leitner suggested innocently from his bed, and McBride repressed a snort. *Nothing wrong with the English at all.* "Who will conduct the investigative meeting? One of my people or yours?"

Lila seemed to deflate. "Both," she said bitterly. "My immediate superior and a General Sharot from the Israeli embassy. It's scheduled for ten o'clock this morning. I have to ask you some preliminary questions." She glanced around as if looking for something to conduct her fear and shame away. Her gaze fastened on McBride. "I'll need you there," she snapped. "You're a state, Detective Inspector! I swear, if I find out you've been pulling unauthorised night shifts after Sim Carlyle… That case is in hand. It no longer concerns you at all."

McBride got to his feet. He almost didn't like to do it to her. She looked ready to shatter and fall into unwieldy bits as it was. Twelve hours was fast for the Lothian commissioners to set up a preliminary meet. Something being taken very seriously indeed. "Is it solved, then?" he asked her. "Your Carlyle case? Did we bring the bastard in?"

"What? No, of course not. That case is still ongoing, as you very well know, and I can't discuss it in front of—"

"Aye. Right." He reached into the inner pocket of his coat. "It's just that these might help." Dispassionately he dumped the small plastic bag containing the digital photo cards into her reflexively outstretched hands. Then he limped to the door. His knee still hurt, and he was exhausted. If he didn't have to be on call until ten, he could go home and catch up on some kip, and maybe have time to think about why he felt closer to an Israeli stranger than to Andrew Barclay, Libby or anyone else in his chilly world. Why, for God's sake, he would give almost anything to be back in a shoot-out again, with death closing in and the stranger's arm locked round his waist…

He paused in the doorway to meet the stranger's smile, his amused brown gaze. "What do they call you, then?" he asked. "If it's not Leitner or your rank?"

"Tobias. Toby for short, and for friends. And you?"

"James."

"James?" The smile became subtly wicked. "I heard your partner call you *Jimmy,* when he thought you were dead."

"Aye. Well, *he'll* be dead the next time. It's just James."

The flat was quiet. Empty and cold. For once McBride wouldn't have minded the wail of free-form jazz beyond the party wall—his sax-playing neighbour, in endless rehearsal for the Fringe. Daytime hours at home, the rest of the world about its business, made him desolate. And perversely he was wide-awake. The look on Lila's face as he'd given her the evidence bag, the mix of apprehension and disbelief, kept coming back to him. It should have been a good moment. He'd anticipated taking a good deal of pleasure from it.

But what the hell was he going to do now? Lila wasn't likely to reinstate him because he'd proved her wrong. Quite the bloody opposite. Wondering if he'd cut off his nose to spite his face, McBride slung his coat onto the sofa and thought about an early-morning nip of Cutty, just enough to drive the cold from his bones and maybe knock him out enough to sleep.

Or he could turn the time to good account and wrap up Grace's presents. That was a better idea. She wouldn't be here on the day, but he could make a stocking of the little things and give it to Libby to hang on her bed the way she liked.

He noticed the answer phone was flashing. He hated the thing and ignored it when he could, but this morning the prospect of a human voice was not displeasing. For a second his brain toyed irrationally with the notion that Tobias Leitner—Toby—might have somehow got his number. Climbed out of bed, gunshot wound and all, and found a hospital payphone. Smiling at his stupidity, McBride played the message back.

He didn't understand it.

Yet it was clear enough and very short: "Get back the evidence, and keep your mouth shut, or you'll never see her again." He sat on the arm of the sofa, unaware his knees had given. There were plenty of possibilities. A wrong number was the best of them. *See who?* Maybe someone had abducted Lila, again the best possible option. Why was there cobwebby scarlet mist in front of his eyes?

The phone rang. McBride picked up straightaway. He waited in silence. He knew exactly how to deal with kidnappers. Disorient them by nonresponse, the first in a series of moves you could use to prolong the call and get a trace on it. It was instinct, that was all. He was a professional, rigid-backed copper, waiting in dry-mouthed patience to hear what he must do.

"Is…is that you?"

Libby. His spine melted. He leaned one elbow on the phone table, resting his brow on the other hand. "Aye. Sorry, Libs. You all right?" She didn't sound it, but that could be anything—her car broken down or a row with the brat over

school.

"Jimmy, tell me she's with you."

"Keep your mouth shut, or you'll never see her again."

"Libby," he said. "She'll be truant from the school again."

"No. She never got there." Libby's voice seemed to be finding him through panes of glass: he heard them shatter. "Jimmy, check her room. She might have got your keys again. Check the street, the hallway. *Tell me she's fucking well there!*"

The door to Grace's room was open. Her little bedroom, though better decorated than the rest of the flat, allowed no place to hide. McBride could see into every corner from here. "Wait a bit," he muttered and lurched to his feet, setting the receiver down.

He stumbled into the communal hall and slipped halfway down one flight of steps on the oilcloth before he could catch himself. His nosy old bitch of a downstairs neighbour was there on the instant—the first time in his tenancy McBride had been grateful to see her. "Mrs. Calvi, have you seen my Grace? Has she been here?" *If you don't know, you interfering old bat, no one will.*

But she didn't. Grace hadn't. And as for knowing, McBride knew perfectly well for himself. He turned—feeling his tired, aching body like a lead suit around him, making him lumber when he had to fly—and began the long trip back to the phone.

"Libby," he said when he got there. "Have you told anyone?"

"Only you. The school called me. I'm just gonna call Amanda—then my mother. She might've gone there…"

"No. Don't. Don't call anyone."

"What?"

"Call the school back and say she's come home sick. No—I'll do that. And not a word to anybody else, do you hear me?"

A terrible silence from the receiver. Then a thin voice, a ghost voice, so unlike his round, real Libby's that McBride wanted to run from it, run and hide himself forever: "This is something to do with you, isn't it? You and your fucking work. Somebody's snatched my girl because of you!"

"I don't know. I don't know. But you have to promise—"

"Oh, I promise. Here's what else I promise. You have that child home by dark—whatever it takes, you miserable, irresponsible, feckless bloody sot—or I'll find you. With a knife between your ribs. Do you hear me?"

The line clicked and went dead.

Darkness fell at four, and Grace was not found. Libby didn't carry through on her threat. She was too busy weeping, silently, curled up in a chair in the living room of the Corstophine house, face buried on her knees. McBride stood over her, fists clenching and unclenching in the pockets of his coat.

He had gone to the school first. No trouble there—all the staff knew Grace's dad was a policeman. If he said she had flu and needed a few days off, they had no questions. He had kept his tone light, his voice steady. He had walked along the route from the bus stop to the school gates, looking for anything—scuffs on the pavement, a dislodged hair clip—and finding nothing. Then he had called in on Libby's mother and Amanda Campbell in turn, doing a creditable impression of a man calling in on the off chance. Grandma fell for it, not noticing he checked the gravel on her driveway on his way out, glanced at her gate and fence for any trace of frantic nail scratches, for a caught hair or fibre. When he had done the same at Amanda's house, her keen, kindly face had creased immediately with concern, and he had backed away from her, saying he was late for a meeting.

Which had been true: he'd sat, blind and deaf, through the preliminary investigative session at Harle Street. The Israeli general had asked him brief, concise questions, requiring only monosyllables by way of reply. *"Were there metal detectors set up at the venue? Do you believe it was safe?"* No and no, and Lila Stone's basilisk gaze deflecting off him harmlessly, and he had been out and home, where another message had been waiting.

"Libby," he said. "Can you listen to me?" He waited until she nodded, a tiny movement of her tangled hair. "I have to keep going as normal. I have to make it look good."

"Make it look good, copper."

"I have to get the evidence back on a case I've been working, and I have to recant everything I've said about it. They're giving me twenty-four hours to do that. Then they're gonna call again and tell me when and where to hand it over. And then we get Grace back."

Libby stopped crying. She lifted her head. McBride looked at her pretty face, blurred with grief. She said, calmly, "This is over Sim Carlyle, isn't it? He's got her."

"Didn't we warn you, copper? Didn't we say this would follow you home?"

"I don't know." Cold fire sprang up in Libby's eyes, and he amended shakily, "Yes, it's about Carlyle. But I don't know who's holding Grace. All I'm saying is…we have to do as they say. Wait, and not tell anyone. He's…" A stone lodged in McBride's throat. It had been there all day, but suddenly he felt it,

unbearably massive and hot. He struggled not to choke on it. “He’s ruthless. We can’t mess round with him, Libs. He will hurt her if we don’t play dice.”

Libby got up. She walked, spine erect, across the living room and into the hall, where she pulled open the front door. McBride was bemused for a second: had she heard a knock that he hadn’t? But only winter night lay beyond, a black rectangle streaked with the season’s first snow. *That would please Grace,* McBride thought—she’d been making controversial deals with God for a white Christmas for weeks. He realised Libby was holding open the door for him to leave. “All right,” she said softly as he went to stand beside her. “You go and *play dice,* Jimmy. Get out of this house, and don’t ever come back to it until you’ve got my daughter.”

Chapter Seven

McBride spent the night looking out into Fettes Row. The tall Georgian windows had alcoves deep enough to sit in. He pulled the phone to the limit of its extension cable, placed it before him and leaned against the alcove wall.

Once or twice, despite everything, he dozed. His tired brain immediately tried to start dream cycles for him, and in these everything was instantly solved: he heard Grace turning her filched set of keys in the door, and there she was, shamefaced, looking to him to forgive her crimes, intercede for her with Libby.

As he always had. McBride jolted back to awareness. In part it was love, but in part it was the easy way out. Nicer to be her ally than her disciplinarian, even though it forced poor Libby into a game of—he almost smiled—good cop/bad cop.

Snow was catching in the cracks between the cobbles, clinging to the windward arcs of the wrought-iron railings. *If you were so damn worried about the Freemason's Hall,* McBride asked himself irrelevantly, *why didn't you say something?*

But it wasn't irrelevant, was it? Lila hadn't gagged him. He could have complained, insisted on better arrangements. It had been easier to wrap himself up in his tartans and his indignation and let the woman take the fall.

It was always easier to knee-jerk, to react instead of thinking. More than half his decision to continue his pursuit of Sim Carlyle had been a protest against Lila's ban. He could have obeyed her and backed off.

And, had he done so, Grace would have been here. If he listened hard, he could almost hear her breathing through the open bedroom door, hear the little purring snores she began in deep sleep. No. Only the slow growth of frost ferns on glass.

This was his fault.

McBride endured an hour or so of this realisation, marked off in bloodred light on the answer phone's clock. Then he got up. He hadn't checked his weapon back into the Harle Street armoury after the chaos of the night before. He never normally wore it on the streets, but its weight had been reassuring on his shoulder, after he had turned in his blood-soaked regalia, got changed and headed down into the underworld to meet his little grass. He'd locked it into its

cupboard under the kitchen sink when he'd got back, and there it was still.

The cupboard opened easily. Typical, he thought—usually he had to wrestle the key in the lock. He extracted the weapon, raw misery rising up in him. He could taste it. He'd lost his child. He might as well have taken her onto the Grassmarket and given her away. His muscles slackened, and he slumped against the kitchen cupboards, a deep groan tearing from him.

Tobias Leitner had called him a good man. Well, it would take someone who'd only known him five minutes to harbour that illusion, wouldn't it? McBride would soon have put him straight, if he had lived. If he could have only fucking endured to live. He turned the gun in his hands. How many had he fired off? Three? That left five, and God knew he only needed one.

He thought about the one Leitner had taken for him. *Why?* McBride didn't buy his pushing-you-out-of-the-way story. No, not at all: Toby had jumped. *"I couldn't bear to see another good man go down."*

He hadn't seemed like a fool or a poor judge of character. He'd clung to McBride—trusted him, used the shield McBride was offering. McBride remembered his weight in his arms and smelled once again the rich tang of his blood and wondered at the sense of bond that had sprung up in that moment in his heart. As if they'd known each other always.

All right, McBride could die. It would be like him, wouldn't it—seeking the path of least resistance, the easy route out. Leaving the women in his life to take the fall.

He hauled himself off the kitchen floor. He returned to his post in the window and watched the phone.

There was much less distance between McBride and Lila Stone now. Same office, same desk, but they stared at each other across a far-narrower chasm. He could almost smell her fear. Or was it his own? "Thank you for seeing me, Superintendent."

Hearing her rank seemed at once to sting and reassure her. Her face assumed its supercilious mask, the one that normally triggered all McBride's instincts of mischief and rebellion. She looked wasted this morning, the light reflecting off Edinburgh's first serious snowfall blisteringly cruel. McBride didn't suppose it was doing him any favours either, a suspicion she confirmed a moment later. "I'd like to say it's a pleasure," she said. "But you look dreadful. It had better not be a hangover, Detective Inspector."

Thank you, you cow, for opening the door. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about. It…it is a hangover, I'm afraid. You must know by now that I have a problem with alcohol."

"Oh, I'm well aware of that. What I can't believe is that *you* are—and that you're telling me."

"Well," McBride said dryly, "the therapy must be working."

"You've been going to your meetings?"

"Aye, but not here. Your police ones are for wine-sipping pussies, if you don't mind my saying so, ma'am."

Stone rubbed her eyes. "What would it matter if I did? No, I don't mind. I'm just glad you're finally getting help somewhere. Do you want me to take you off duty?"

"Business as usual. And make it look good, copper." "Christ, no!" He forced himself to relax; cleared his throat. "That is…. not unless you think it strictly necessary, ma'am."

"No. No, not if you're taking appropriate measures. Is that what you wanted to see me about?"

"No. I'm afraid it's worse than that. My work on the Sim Carlyle case—as you observed yourself, it wasn't all done while I was perfectly sober. I'm not sure—wouldn't be prepared to swear in court, anyway—that the evidence I've gathered is all accurate or even admissible."

"What?"

"I know. I'm sorry. I've really f—screwed up over this."

"McBride, are you watching your *language* with me?"

"Well. Perhaps I haven't been as respectful as… Anyway, do you understand? I need to rescind some statements and reports I made over Carlyle. I take admissibility very seriously—"

"As do I, and believe me, in ordinary circumstances you'd be in a world of trouble. As it happens, the evidence you turned in last night backs up your former statements perfectly."

McBride swallowed. It made a sharp little noise, like a bitten-back sob, and he turned it into a cough. "You…you've seen the photos?"

"Not personally. But the memory cards have gone to the lab for upload and enhancement, and the preliminary results look very good indeed. Listen—I want Carlyle off the street just as much as you do, even if you did disobey my orders. I'll deal with your insubordination later, when—" Her eyes became distant, and McBride wondered how the sentence would have ended. *When I'm not under investigation myself?* "—when I have time. For now, let's just use what we have. And those photos look to me like a sewn-up case."

McBride tried once more. “I used a snitch to get them. Carlyle could argue entrapment at the least.”

Lila frowned. She shook her head. “McBride, what is *wrong* with you? You’ve happily entrapped this city’s bad bastards for as long as your records go back. Don’t worry—I’ll sort out any issues like that.”

He couldn’t speak. He got up, head spinning, and made for the door. Before he could open it, she stopped him. “I’m glad you can stay on duty.” He turned, trying to look interested, not really caring. “Half the squad’s off with flu, and the Israelis want backup from us to help protect Zvi for the remainder of his visit. I’ve assigned you surveillance with one of their agents. He should be here by now, so off you go, and…well done, Detective Inspector. Really, well done. Admitting the problem is a big step to the cure.”

“James.”

It was the first time McBride had heard his given name that morning. He had only just noticed Lila had dropped the unwanted familiarity. He halted in the corridor. It was different when you invited someone.

It was wholly different when it came from Toby Leitner. McBride spun round. He couldn’t be here, of course: McBride’s thumping head was putting out echoes. Leitner was in hospital, unless he’d died in the night and…

But the man leaning in the doorway to the squad room didn’t look much like a ghost. He was dressed with casual flair in an open-necked shirt and a long black coat whose lines emphasised his tall grace. His left arm was in a sling, but even that looked tailored to fit him, and he seemed otherwise healthy, his warm colouring restored. McBride took the breath he needed to reinflate his lungs. “What…what are you doing here?”

“I work here. For today, anyway—your superintendent told me to pick a member of her team to partner me on surveillance. So I picked you.”

“Was it just my imagination? Didn’t you get shot yesterday?”

“Shoulder wound. And not my gun arm. It takes a lot worse for General Sharot to give you a day off.”

McBride thought fast. *Business as usual* was one thing; he could find time and privacy to make calls, try to figure out some way of activating his underground network without alerting Carlyle. Stuck in a car with a Mossad agent, he was lost. “I’m glad you’re better. Listen—I’m not the best choice of partner for today. There’s some sort of flu going round the department, and…”

“Yes. You look terrible. Come with me, though—it’s easy duty. You won’t have much to do.”

Together they followed the concrete stairwell down into the car park. McBride hadn’t been there since the night of the Christmas party, and his skin crawled with memories. Who the hell had he been back then? He couldn’t even recognise that man, whose biggest concerns in life had been the blow job he’d just got off his partner and where his next lead in the Carlyle case was coming from. He must have been sleepwalking. Well, he was awake now.

He was sharply aware of Toby at his side. The staircase was narrow. Their shoulders touched as they walked. McBride could pick up the tang of antiseptic, hospital soap and under it something very subtle and expensive, like ferns and good leather. Also a trace of blood… “Are you sure you should be out of hospital?”

“General Sharot thinks so. I’m good enough for car duty, anyway. Ah, there she is.”

McBride glanced dully in the direction he indicated. He was almost past reaction, but a flicker of something went through him at the sight of the massive, purring BMW parked alongside the Lothian and Borders squad cars and unmarked Granadas and Mondeos. The old McBride might have given a whistle and run an appreciative hand over her bonnet. “Well,” Toby said, shrugging, taking the keys from the deliveryman, “this will be less conspicuous parked outside the Israeli embassy than a battered Ford. And that’s all we have to do today—sit outside and make sure no one untoward goes in. Come on.”

McBride obeyed. There was an easy command in Leitner’s voice, a trick like Amanda’s of making him want to obey and thus not feel ordered at all. Perhaps in his normal state McBride would have found it annoying. But at this moment, undone, unstrung, it was a painful relief to have something to follow. He stood on the kerb, hands in his pockets, adrift.

“James.”

Toby was holding the door for him. Shivering, avoiding his concerned gaze, McBride got in.

The car was a warm velvet cave. Leitner had run the heaters all the way across the New Town to St. Michael’s and now, parked down the road from the embassy building, was keeping the engine ticking over. From time to time he flicked the windscreen clear of gathering snowflakes. It was hard for McBride to

believe in a world beyond the fragrant interior wrapping him round: a world just three yards away, where old ladies struggled with their shopping on the ice, and a larger world, where somewhere in some unimaginable fucking corner of his city, Sim Carlyle held captive his little girl.

No. Belief was impossible. Not Gracie, who, though she'd had a tough time through the divorce, had never known a harsh word or a blow. Who'd never missed a meal or passed an unsheltered night.

God, what if she was cold? And that was suddenly the least of the things McBride could imagine for her: he leaned forward, imagining them all.

"Are you all right?"

"Aye, just…" McBride coughed his throat clear of a moan of fright and sat up. "Shoelaces. New shoes."

"Oh. Not because I bled on the old ones?"

"What? Oh no. No, they were hired, like the rest of the gear."

Leitner nodded. His attention was fixed, like a good surveillance man's, on the steps of the embassy ahead. McBride could only see his fine-cut profile. "Was any of it redeemable?"

"The socks, maybe. Don't worry—good tartan's meant to have blood spilled on it. I left Lila to explain it to McCall's."

"Have you seen her this morning?"

For a moment McBride couldn't remember. He blinked hard, rubbing a hand across his mouth. "Yes," he said, trying desperately for levity. "She wasn't her normal chipper self."

"No, I should think not. The general wasn't pleased, to have his ambassador given a new parting the night before last. I understand your board of commissioners has given Superintendent Stone one last chance to prove herself. She'll be under constant supervision from now on."

A silence fell. McBride tried to recall how his old self would have responded to this news. Laughed his arse off, probably. He couldn't even manage a smile. "Oh," he said aridly. "That'll go down well."

"By the way, there's something I meant to ask. The hospital served me something called *black pudding* for my breakfast this morning. Can you tell me what that is?"

McBride frowned at the change of tack. "Did you eat it?"

"No. Some instinct steered me to the melon balls and croissant."

"You said you weren't religious, right?"

"Right, but I do try to keep kosher."

"Okay. Then don't eat that."

Another silence—awkward this time, while McBride realised Leitner had

been chatting to fill a gap. No, more than that—to distract him, as if he knew something was wrong.

Nobody could know, nobody. McBride had to make an effort. “Is Ambassador Zvi okay?”

“His feathers are ruffled. Otherwise he’s fine. General Sharot is anxious to meet the officer who foiled the attack, by the way, by picking off that first sniper.”

“Oh. Who…” McBride tailed off.

Leitner let go his watchful attitude—turned and frankly stared at him. “James. What the hell is the matter?”

That intense, dark gaze was almost impossible to bear. Even staring at the floor, catching it sidelong, McBride felt it peeling layers off him. Cracking him out of his shell. *No,* he commanded himself. “Nothing,” he rasped. “This flu’s got me stupid, that’s all.”

Leitner put out a hand. McBride flinched and tried to pull back when it closed on his own. But Leitner’s grip was tenderly absolute. His thumb found its way into McBride’s palm and pressed him there, sending what felt like a hot cable up his right arm and across his chest to his heart. Involuntarily he looked up—straight into Leitner’s eyes.

He couldn’t move. He sat with his hand in Leitner’s, barely breathing.

“Listen to me, James. My work with Mossad has brought me into contact with hundreds of people in…bad situations.” His grasp tightened. “Hundreds of people who look sick with fear in just the way you do now. Do you want to tell me?”

Tell you what? McBride almost tried it. He knew which facial muscles he would have to move to produce an incredulous smile. Instead—and he couldn’t remember the moment of surrender, of decision, not at all—he snatched one shallow breath and said, “He’s got my kid. Oh God, Toby. Sim Carlyle’s got my kid.”

“Carlyle? Your human trafficker?”

“Aye. The one I handed Lila the evidence on last night. That’s the price—he wants that back and for me to retract all the statements I’ve made on the case. It’s been over twenty-four hours. He’s had her for—”

“Hush,” Leitner commanded. McBride crashed to a halt, the unthinkable period for which his daughter had been in the hands of hostile strangers breaking to bits in his mouth. “This Carlyle. He’s powerful, or powerfully connected anyway? And he’s told you—because you’re here now—to act as if nothing’s happened?”

McBride nodded. Voice cracking, he repeated the phrases that had been

haunting him all night. “Business as usual. Make it look good.”

“Then that’s what we must do, starting now. I am going to help you. Look up and out of the window in case we’re being watched. Take heart.”

McBride did as he was bidden. It was hard—his grief was like rocks pressing down on the back of his skull—but he couldn’t believe he’d lapsed even this far, and got his chin up with fierce determination. Leitner’s grasp was still firm round his: he squeezed once, tightly, then let him go. “What am I going to do?” he whispered, staring out through the snow.

“Has he asked for anything else? Money or…”

“No. Just the evidence. The best of it’s a couple of digital photo cards my snitch gave me. Toby, what am I—”

“You’re going to cooperate. Fully and straightaway.”

McBride felt his mouth open. His lips were slightly numb, and he struggled to articulate past the dusty dryness of his throat. Leitner had resumed his watch of the embassy, his expression unreadable. “What? I thought you… I thought your lot—Mossad—had a nonnegotiation policy.”

“Some units. My unit does. They apply it stringently.”

“Then…”

“What do you believe, James? Absolute nonnegotiation makes hostage-taking pointless? Yes, ultimately. Ideally. But how many lives, how many abductions is it going to cost before every terrorist on the planet is convinced of that?”

McBride, lost in his fear as he was, heard the passion of this statement and wondered. “I…I don’t know.”

“I don’t either. I used to think I did—I used to be very certain. Listen, James—this is one little girl, not the Munich Olympics. Not a principle my nation has to get across to another nation’s militants. There will be other ways and times to catch this Carlyle of yours. We only have one chance to retrieve your daughter.”

“I tried. I told Lila I’d been drunk throughout the investigation. I wish it had been harder for her to believe, but…it was useless anyway. She said the photos proved me right in spite of myself.”

“Has she acted on them?”

“Not yet. She said they’d gone for enhancement. Most of what my snitch got was pretty dark.”

“Good. Good.” Leitner drummed his fingers on the wheel. “And without these photos, the rest of your case falls down?”

“Not really. I was pretty close before I got them. But they would clinch it, yes.”

“Then we will retrieve them.”

A brief helpless laugh tore out of McBride. He remembered his obligations and smoothed his expression clear. “They’re in a high-security police lab. How do we plan to do that?”

“With all due respect, outside of London, British police have no idea what *high security* means.”

“But they’ll be on the computers now, in the system.”

“James, I am Mossad. At least—” his voice roughened, “—at least for now. You may as well know, your Lila isn’t the only one being given her last chance. My partner, Avrom—he was taken hostage himself during our raid in the West Bank. My unit’s noncooperation policy extends even to its own men. Oh, I’d believed in it myself. I believed, right until I saw a gun pressed to Avi’s head. And then I tried to cut a deal. I offered six insurgents safe passage, right in front of my *katsa*, my…my superior officer.”

McBride shivered. The car was cooling, but it wasn’t that. He was seeing a young man—as beautiful and real as Toby Leitner—being held at gunpoint. In the midst of his fear, he saw it. “It…it didn’t work?”

“It might have. I don’t know. My *katsa* countermanded it, and they shot Avi.” It was calmly delivered, but McBride heard clearly the abyss of pain behind the words. “So. I am now no longer so sure about our hard-line policies. I’m on the thinnest of ice with Mossad. But thankfully I still have the skills they taught me, and we are going to use them to do what we have to for this bastard Carlyle, and get your little girl back. What’s her name?”

“Grace,” McBride said weakly.

“Grace…” Toby fell into thoughtful silence for a moment. “In Hebrew we would say *Chanah.* And no one else knows about this?”

“Only her mother. My wife, Libby.”

It had only been twelve months. McBride still sometimes forgot to add the *ex.* Why did it matter? It didn’t, he supposed, except Toby’s face had clouded oddly. “That is—we’re divorced. I didn’t tell her, not really. She worked it out for herself.”

“And she wouldn’t confide in anyone?”

“No, not Libs. She’s staunch to her marrow.”

“And all alone.”

McBride swallowed. *Yes. As lonely as I was until I found you.* The injustice of it struck him hard. How had he become so unremittingly, casually selfish? “Yes,” he said, ashamed. “She’s all by herself with this. I didn’t… I only thought about how it was for me.”

“Here.” Toby reached into an inside pocket and handed McBride a mobile that bore more resemblance to a slick, tiny NASA computer. “I doubt your friend

Carlyle is smart enough to trace calls, but he won’t trace any on that. Call Libby on her mobile and tell her what we’re going to do. Tell her everything will be all right.”

Chapter Eight

Blackfriars car park—a multistorey concrete eyesore, a demolition project that had run out of cash with half the structure still intact and half in an avalanche of rubble and rusting girders. McBride stood alone in the vast space outside it. Here a new factory had been meant to take root, that project too shelved for lack of funds. It had been a bad year.

A bad year, and the snow that might have softened the back end of it, blanketed its sorrows, had turned to sleet, every mean speck of it a wet, wind-driven devil that found its way into the gaps in McBride's clothing. Between the buttons of his coat, into his upturned collar. The scarf wrapped round his throat was no defence. His hands, thrust deep into his pockets, had gone numb some twenty minutes before. Sim Carlyle was late for their proposed meet. McBride waited.

He did not move when two sets of headlights finally appeared on the edge of the industrial estate. He kept his head up, let the sleet batter his face and eyes and allowed himself to be seen. He was not armed. Tucked inside his coat, pressed safely tight to his side in a plastic bag, were not only the digital photo cards, but three slim files he and Toby had lifted from Lila Stone's office. Motionless, rigid as a statue in the wind, McBride almost smiled. For a while for two strange hours between two and four in the morning, he had nearly forgotten the grief and fear behind his mission. Toby, who up until then had scarcely conformed to McBride's image of a secret agent, had transformed. He'd curtly sent McBride off to trip the alarms on one of the Harle Street back exits, then dodged past the deserted security desk out front. By the time McBride had made his way back to their prearranged meeting point in a little-used side alley, he had disabled the alarms for that whole sector of the building, and he'd let McBride in through the fire doors, only the smallest glimmer of amusement showing he might have been enjoying his work.

McBride had almost enjoyed it too. He watched the double set of headlights come closer, sending silver cones through the sleet. Here in the half-world between Edinburgh's civilised centre and the industrial wastes, he could see Christmas lights strung along the distant streets. Their reflections touched the puddles, filled them with delicate blossoms of light. Gracie loved them, pestered

the life out of both parents to take her to see whatever Z-list celebrity had been bribed to do the switch-on. This year neither Libby nor McBride had found time. There'd been a row. McBride watched the tyres of the oncoming vehicles shatter the flowers to mud and ice.

They pulled up ten yards away from him. Two men got out of the first and one from the second. The passenger from the first vehicle began an immediate, swaggering walk towards him—fearless, and with good reason. McBride could see the heat the other two were packing from here. He wasn't really interested in them, or in the man striding up to plant himself, arms folded, directly in front of him. He couldn't see into the backseat of either car. Or maybe it was the front seat of the second that was all in all to him, the counterbalance between life and death. "Do you have her?" he said, staring over the man's shoulder. "Is my daughter with you?"

"Aye. A deal's a deal, copper."

McBride's attention snapped to him. He knew the voice. *"Make it look good, copper."* "Sim Carlyle," he rasped. "My God. The organ-grinder."

"Aye, well." Carlyle had looked different in his mug shots and in the snitch's photos. Up close, he was a skinny insignificance of a man; McBride would not have glanced twice at him in the street. "No reason the monkeys should have all the fun. I wanted to take a look at you, McBride, and for you to have a look at me. Do you understand now, that I can't have my business concerns scrutinised? That I have to be left to go my own way?"

McBride took him in. He didn't even look particularly villainous. His hair was clean, the teeth in his thin-lipped smile no better or worse than the average Scotsman's. He wore a nondescript hooded fleece. "I understand," McBride said.

"Good. Because for a while back there, you weren't taking me or my warnings seriously at all."

"No. I know. I'm sorry."

"That's the man. Now, it's a cunt of a night, so we'll no' hang about. What do you have for me?"

"What you asked for." McBride took a careful step back. He wanted the men waiting by the cars to be able to see and understand his movements. "The photo cards and three files of evidence. They're inside my coat to keep them dry. I'm going to open it and reach in with my right hand. I'm unarmed. Okay?"

"Knock yourself out." Carlyle seemed only amused by his caution. He'd extracted from one pocket a Biro lid that had seen some chewing already, and stuck its stem between his teeth, smiling politely. "I maun say," he observed around the obstruction, "it's a sight easier, dealing with a pro like yourself. I won't insult you by looking at the goods."

McBride took out the plastic bag. It seemed so light and fragile, to be payment for a life. He had stood by and watched in the Harle Street photographic lab while Toby had used the sophisticated little phone to access the internet and download code after code, hack after hack, to get into the Lothian PD's mainframe. On thin ice with Mossad or not, he clearly still had friends there: McBride had listened as he tucked the device beneath his ear and conducted conversations in rapid-fire Hebrew, tapping away at one terminal's board and then another, until McBride had recognised the first in the sequence of dark, blurry pictures his snitch had obtained.

Had watched them disappear. "Will it insult you," he said to Sim Carlyle, "if I ask to look at *your* goods?" Toby had instructed him to hand over the evidence sight unseen if he had to—if anyone's safety should depend on it—but to try, if he could, to make Grace's abductors show their hand. *"To obtain proof of life,"* Toby had said.

Carlyle shrugged. He turned to glance back at the cars. As if waiting for this signal, the man by the second one walked around its bonnet and pulled open the passenger door.

Not a sight, but a sound. McBride's desperate hopes had only given him an image of how it would be to get back his girl—her bright little flag of red-gold hair on the fly, her skinny frame running hard to cross the space between them. He lowered his head: it was her voice slicing out into the night, closing the gap. His eyes stung. She never called him *Daddy*, not since she'd been six years old. More likely to call him *McBride* than let down her fierce guard so far as that. But there it was: *"Daddy, Daddy! Take me home!"*

"All right!" He shoved the bag into Sim Carlyle's outstretched hands. "All right! Let her come to me."

"Ah, now. Have a care, McBride. You *are* a pro—too much of one to be here alone. You'll not take it amiss, I hope, if I ask you to stand here a moment longer while my friends and I get clear." McBride sucked a breath to protest—but the passenger door was closing again, the lost little voice cutting off as it shut. "No need to worry. See, I'm just going to lock her in…" Carlyle pulled a key from his pocket and pointed it back toward the car. Sidelights flashed; a soft grind of remote locking found its way through the wind. "And I'm going to give the key to you. Me and my—well, I suppose you'd call them *cronies*—we'll leave in the other car. Soon as our taillights disappear, she's all yours."

They were gone. McBride began to move. The stupid thing was that, after all this, he found he couldn't run—his legs wouldn't bear him any faster than this nightmare slow-motion walk. A low cry tore from him. What must his girl be thinking, that he was only *walking* to release her, to rescue her…? His numb

hand went slack on the key, and he fumbled and dropped it: heard it skitter away across the concrete. *"Shit!"*

The sleet-whipped dark around him took a form. Down on his knees, scrabbling, McBride felt rather than saw Toby Leitner shoot past him, unerringly picking out the key from a puddle a few feet away. Leitner was like a piece of the night, his movements powerful and sure. "I'll get it!" he yelled to McBride across the gale. "I'll get it! Stay there!"

He must have thought McBride was hurt. He wasn't wrong, come to think of it. How had he ended up here on his knees? He'd only bent to see if he could find the damn key. Then his injured leg had gone out from him, and Toby had stepped in. Come running down from his surveillance post behind the concrete pillars of the multistorey.

And that was all right. For all its occasional haughtiness, Toby's was a face a frightened kid would like to see appearing out of the dark—those softly shining eyes and that sweet smile.

But why did Toby want to get there first? Why was he pallid with urgency, warding McBride off with an outstretched hand? McBride's guts lurched. *Bollocks!* he told himself fiercely. *You heard her. You'd have heard a gunshot, even a silenced one, from there.* He staggered to his feet. His skin was going cold over every inch of his body, his tongue turning to stone. Toby was a good man, a kind one. He cared about Libby and Grace without ever having seen them. And yet he'd shouted, *"I'll get it."* Why the hell hadn't he said, *I'll get her?*

McBride reached the car just as Toby tore the door open. He tried to shoulder him aside. There should have been no problem, in terms of relative bulk—when McBride shouldered someone, they moved—but Toby was set like a rock. "No," he said, turning, grabbing McBride so hard by both arms that the strength of his grip bruised the bone. "James! No."

"What?" McBride roared into his face. "Fuck it, let me go! I heard her! She's fine. I—"

"You heard a recording." The door was open wide. Toby's eyes were terrible on his—bleak, remorseless. "They taped her. She's not there."

McBride almost laughed. Then, from the car's dark interior, came the thin, high voice, the same as before—*"Daddy, Daddy! Take me home!"*

The same as before. Exactly the same. McBride heaved his weight forward again, and this time Toby let him go. McBride knew very well you had to, with some of the bereaved. They wouldn't take *dead* for an answer; you had to let them into the morgue. He leaned into the car, grabbing at the far side of the passenger seat to keep from falling.

Anyway Toby was wrong. It was a CD, not a tape. *Nice touch,* something in

McBride observed, the part of his good copper's mind that never shut down, that always had time to admire the Edinburgh criminal and all his works. On a tape or an MP3, anything analogue or through the radio, he might have heard the hiss. He might have known. But this was perfect—crystal clear. The *take me home* phrase played again. Then there was a tiny gap—not jerky at all, just enough for a scared child to draw a breath before going on—*"Daddy, come and get me. They've no' hurt me, but I'm frightened!"* Then there was a series of sobs.

McBride straightened and eased out of the car. He might have heard more—Carlyle's man might have let the disc play on—if he hadn't fallen, like a slab of bloody granite, for the very first phrase. He was hearing more now.

Toby moved him gently aside. He reached into the car, found the right button and stopped the CD. He ejected it neatly, took a beautifully clean white handkerchief from his coat's breast pocket and wrapped the disc. "I…I saw," he said, tucking it away. "From where I was, back behind the pillars. I thought I saw the car was empty, but I couldn't be sure. I couldn't tell you."

No. He wouldn't have been able to; it hadn't been his call. It had been McBride's—on the ground, not twenty feet away. McBride had given away their bargaining chip, their one chance. He'd sold Grace out—for the second fucking time, he'd thrown away his child.

The wind changed direction and found a new chill. The sleet had thinned out to nothing. Too late for a white Christmas now—there was nothing but cold and the wolf's-tooth wind and emptiness.

Toby stepped around him. Why? What was he doing? Did he think the world would be any less vacant for McBride, that McBride would be to himself any less of a failure, a thing, a bloody abomination, if a man stood in one place rather than another and held his shoulders—even a man with tears of shared feeling in his wide dark eyes? "I'm *sorry,*" Toby said. "Oh, James."

He was trying to shield McBride from the wind. That was why he'd moved. It took McBride a moment to work this out, and when he did, it broke him. As no words could have done—no, not even that grated-out *sorry,* not even tears. That sheltering move was instinctive. McBride did it with Grace when they were out, automatically shepherding her to his leeward side. Edinburgh was a wind-whipped town. When she'd been tiny, he'd chosen which hip to carry her on according to which of the four quarters was howling that day.

McBride burst into tears. Toby stepped forward and seized him. McBride crashed into his arms, clutching everything he could get of him, crushing the fabric of his coat. Toby's hand found the back of his skull and spread there, stroking, pressing it down. "Ah, James! It's all right, it's all right!" It wasn't, but McBride lost all hope of saying so as his mouth found dark wool on Toby's

shoulder and opened wide in a gut-wrenching sob. Scents of lanolin and rich, assuring male body rushed into his lungs. *No!* He tried to fight, but Toby's arms had gone round him like cables, one round his waist and the other across his back. *Libby doesn't have this comfort, Grace doesn't have it and I, least deserving—I can't…*

But he had no choice. Toby held him fast, sheltering him from the wind, and after a moment McBride buried his face tight against his shoulder, grasped him as hard as he was being held and gave up and wept.

The CD deck in the BMW was state-of-the-art, better than anything McBride had at his flat. And parked up in this wasteland, he wouldn't disturb the neighbours with his daughter's cries for help, played and replayed at maximum volume while he tried to recognise a background noise. There *was* something, eight seconds or so into the third clip—a kind of whistling, followed by a rumble. He played it again and again. It was easy to find. It fell right after *"Daddy, please help me"* and right before a sobbed *"Oh, Daddy, please take me home."*

Toby, who had been listening too, chin propped on his hands on the wheel, reached over and snapped the player off. McBride turned on him with something between a sob and a snarl. "What are you doing?"

"Enough, James. It's enough for now."

"You wait until it's your kid. Then you can tell me what's damn well *enough!*" In answer Toby only passed him the handkerchief he'd wrapped the disc in. McBride caught a glimpse of himself in the rearview and took it, shuddering. "Sorry."

"It's all right. I don't have a child. I can't feel what you're feeling. But if you don't go home now and get some sleep, you'll be useless to her. Have you got a laptop with a CD drive? Broadband?"

"I… Yes, I do."

"Right. I'll get this uploaded and sent to my contacts in Tel Aviv. And we should go back to your flat anyway. He's been communicating with you via your answer phone, and—"

"Why would he leave me any more messages? I gave him what he wanted."

"A man like Carlyle won't stop there, James. He won't waste what he's got, not now he's seen how far you'll go to retrieve it."

But in the flat, the answer phone was silent. Something in the blackness of its lights, its dumb, smug silence, warped McBride's grief into rage. He took his sleet-soaked coat off and threw it onto the sofa. *Take your guest's,* a tiny voice of long-ago home training tried to instruct him, but he ignored it. Ignored Toby, who had followed him up the stairs and was standing, just as wet and chilly as he was, looking around the living room. McBride gestured to the laptop on the table, then turned and walked away.

He stood in the kitchen. He knew why he'd come here, of course. He might have elected not to put a bullet into his brain the night before, but still he had his escapes. Not so radical, but bloody effective, and—he smiled, uncorking a bottle of Cutty—a damn sight quieter.

Toby appeared in the kitchen doorway. McBride saw him only as a reflection in the sleet-flecked window and didn't turn round. He picked up a glass from the draining board: might as well impress his guest and not drink from the bottle. "Thought you were busy…uploading that disc to Yahweh, or whoever your Israeli contact might be."

The ghost in the window glass shrugged. Even from here McBride could see its eyes were full of compassion, shared pain. He didn't need either. "It's done," Toby said. "I cc'd the Mossad acoustics lab too, just in case. Why was it so easy for your boss to believe you were drunk throughout your Carlyle case?"

McBride stepped aside, just far enough so Toby could see, then poured himself a good, theatrical treble, bottle held high. He'd faked his confession for Lila that morning, but it was real enough now, the hunger inside him, the desire to numb his senses even in full knowledge that he needed them all razor-sharp, giving his words a terrible authenticity. "Isn't it obvious? I'm a bloody alcoholic. That's why. Oh, I'm sorry. Would you like one?"

"No, thank you. I…"

"Of course not. What would a nice, prim, clean-living Jew know about—"

Toby seized his arm. It was the one McBride was using to lift his glass. Something strange happened to it—all the strength went out of McBride's grip, and the tumbler fell and shattered on the kitchen floor. "What the fuck, man?" Jerking his head up, he tried to square off to Toby, who was no longer a ghost, but a big, angry, real human being, dark eyes blazing into his. "Let me go."

"Oh, I will." Releasing his grasp, he gave McBride a contemptuous shove and stepped back. McBride rubbed at his numb hand. He noticed distantly that Toby had taken off his coat uninvited. The cuffs of the fine black sweater he wore underneath were damp: he had pushed the sleeves back, exposing tanned,

sculpted forearms. “I told you, McBride. I’m not a religious Jew—I’m a thoroughly secular one, and I’ve drowned my sorrows in ways that would make your hair stand on end.” Involuntarily McBride looked at the skin exposed between Toby’s wrists and his elbows. Toby wasn’t showing it to him—his hands were down by his sides, fists clenching—but McBride, after fifteen years dealing with junkies on Auld Reekie’s streets, could spot track marks, even ones as ancient and near-faded as these. “I’ve done undercovers that turned me into as desperate a crackhead as the bastards I was after. And when my Avi died, I… didn’t want to know anymore. I took what bloody comfort I could.”

Fury rose in McBride. What did Toby want? *Okay, so you know how it feels to have an addiction?* He was clean now—McBride could be in no doubt over that; he could almost smell the man’s cleanliness, the strength boiling off him in waves. He didn’t need this shining example standing over him, this fiery sword, making him feel smaller and meaner and dirtier even than he knew himself to be… “Screw you,” he choked out. “You don’t know anything. Your lad died, and I’m fucking sorry, but it wasn’t your fault.”

“No more is the loss of your daughter yours.”

“Och, the devil it isn’t! Libby tried to tell me. Lila Stone tried to drag me in off the streets. Even Sim Carlyle gave me warning—had his heavy boy tell me the trouble was going to follow me home.” He turned back to the kitchen bench. If Toby was going to make him smash his glassware, he would just have to watch him swig from the damn bottle after all…

A hand closed on his shoulder. “James. Please don’t.”

“Ah, fuck off!” McBride wrenched round on reflex. His anger peaked, and he threw one wild, blind punch, not caring where he connected or how much damage he would do.

Not that it mattered. Toby picked his fist out of the air as if it had been a bunch of roses. Effortless. McBride felt his blow’s force turned against him and spun away, staggering to crash into the kitchen table.

The impact somehow steadied him. Knocked a demon out of him, maybe—he was glad, in the instant between hitting the table and grabbing its edge for support, that he’d been so easily thwarted.

So what the hell was Toby doing on the floor? McBride got his balance. “Toby?”

“I’m all right. Stay back.”

Belatedly it struck McBride that Toby had arrived that night minus his sling. Well, he couldn’t have done much with one arm strapped up like that, could he? Couldn’t have driven, or tapped a symphony of magic and technology out of the Harle Street computer boards. Couldn’t have wrapped a fearless, lifesaving

embrace around that thankless bastard James McBride when his world had tried to end in a freezing car park half an hour before.

"Oh God," McBride whispered and stumbled over to drop to his knees in front of him. Blocking that punch must have wrenched every muscle round the bullet wound. "Sit up a bit. Let me see."

"It's nothing. I'm fine."

But the rich voice was squeezed to a shadow of itself. Toby's head was down, his fringe concealing his expression. Tenderly McBride brushed back the dark hair. "Did I make you bleed again? Here…" Evading Toby's deflecting hands, he reached to dab at the black cashmere over his heart. It didn't feel wet, but he had to be sure, and he grabbed the jumper's hem and lifted. "All right. No, your dressings look okay, thank God. Shit, Toby—I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I shouldn't interfere with your…God-given right to get pissed…"

"Ssh. I'm not going to. Come here—let me help you up."

But neither of them moved. McBride did not let go the edge of Toby's jumper, nor did he lower it. Below the hospital bandages, the broad chest was brown and smooth as the wet, hard-packed sand at Forvie dunes. And so bloody *warm*—McBride's thumb brushed the skin by accident, and then, unable to help himself, he spread his left hand flat on the uninjured shoulder, on the pad of pectoral muscle just above the nipple.

Toby flinched. "Your hands are cold."

"Everything's cold," McBride rasped. To his astonishment, Toby placed a warm, lifting touch on his jaw. God, if he looked up—if he let Toby raise his chin—they were so close that their mouths would meet, and that would at best be a crippling embarrassment, and at worst…

A kiss. He closed his eyes. For a wild, flashing instant, he was twenty-four years and fifty miles away, lying in the birch grove that gave Loch Beithe its name. Then he thudded back into his flesh—his own dark here and now, where the only light, the only heat, was the press of Toby Leitner's mouth to his. It was impossible. It was so fucking wrong. It was all and everything McBride had ever wanted, and he seized him, wrapping both arms round his neck.

He didn't know which of them put the effort into hoisting the other off the floor. He was only aware of Toby's embrace—the heat of it closing around him once more, driving the cold from his bones. He gasped as his spine hit the kitchen wall, making china rattle in the cupboards. Toby's grip closed in the fabric of his shirt, tugging upwards, and suddenly there was that sunlight touch direct on his skin. "Oh, don't. Don't, I'm not…"

"What?"

"Not toned and nice like you. I spend too long at a desk. I—"

“What? You’re lovely.” McBride twitched in astonishment: Toby sounded genuine, genuinely surprised. “Solid. Real. Please let me touch you.”

So McBride did: clutching Toby’s shoulders, pressing rough kisses to his mouth and the side of his neck, he let the warm hands untuck his shirt tails, slide up and under to caress his chilly skin. The curve of his spine, the place just over the waistband of his trousers where he’d begun, unaware of it even himself until this moment, to be a bit shy of his body and its ageing, a bit ashamed. *“Solid. Real.”* A shudder of pleasure ran through him, and he rolled his hips against Toby’s, erection surging up hot and hard and straightaway, racking a moan of embarrassment out of him until he felt Toby’s returning thrust, and everything about it was perfect—so good, like coming home, a refuge even in McBride’s bleakest midwinter night. “Ah, stop! We can’t do this!”

“I know. I know.” Toby shoved himself back to arm’s length and stood panting. “I don’t know what I was thinking. Forgive me.”

“Forgive *you*…” McBride ran shaky, regretful fingertips down Toby’s chest. “What the hell must you think of me—doing this, when my girl is… When I don’t even know if she’s alive or—”

“No.” Toby captured his wrists, held them hard. “She’s alive. And you were just reaching for life, James. We both were. If it makes you feel any better, I… swore I’d never touch anyone again, not after Avrom.” He hesitated and gave McBride a look that went through him like a hot knife into butter, sweeter than a summer wind. “I never thought I’d want to.”

“Toby…”

“Ssh. It isn’t for now, is it? Not for now. For now I want you to go to bed and try at least to rest for a couple of hours. I’ll watch the phone.”

McBride nodded mutely. The hormonal surge dying back in his system, he was worn to cobwebs, swaying on his feet. “All right. Do you reckon… Should I call Libs?”

“Do you think she’ll have been able to get to sleep?”

“I dunno. If she’s as tired as I am, maybe.”

“Then don’t. Not with news like this. We’ll wait till morning.”

“He’ll have called by then, won’t he? Carlyle?”

Toby frowned. He rubbed the backs of McBride’s wrists with his thumbs, making the little bones crackle. The gesture was intimate, undemanding. “He values Grace. And he hasn’t got full price for her out of you yet. He’ll call.”

And yet, three hours later, stumbling out of his bedroom into a dead-grey Edinburgh dawn, McBride understood at once that the phone had stayed silent. He also knew without a second glance that a different version of Toby Leitner was pacing his living room to the ones he'd met so far. This wasn't the cool, professional Mossad agent or the passionate lover of this morning's small hours. This man was bitterly furious. "He didn't ring," McBride said, taking firm hold of the back of an armchair.

Toby swung round at the end of his lap. He strode back down the track he'd almost worn in the carpet and stopped in front of McBride. In this light, McBride could see—and even in this desolation, it touched him and brought him an odd sense of relief and satisfaction—that this powerful man, whom he'd thought to be in his mid-thirties at most, was about the same age he was. Fine lines marked his brow. The pale light revealed flecks of silver in his hair. "No, he did not," Toby declared grimly, "and now I know why."

McBride nodded. He had woken with the same thought running through his mind. "He's a trafficker," he said. "He's got the evidence he wanted, and he knows I've got my copper's salary and bugger-all else than that. He's not after a ransom. He's found a…" His throat dried, and he choked, letting his aching head drop forward into his hands.

"He's found a buyer for her." Toby's words fell like stones into the quiet room. "I'm sorry, James. That's why he's gone silent on us."

The phone rang. Somehow McBride pushed himself upright, exchanged one grim look with Toby, and went to pick up. Covered the receiver and mouthed across the room to him, "No. Only Libby," then folded down into the alcove and listened while his child's poor mother let go a night's worth of fear and grief down the line. Peripherally he noticed Toby going to the computer—his movement more of a pounce, as if he'd heard something. Then he shook his head, running a hand into his hair. "Libs. Libby, no. I know you're scared, but I've told you why we can't involve other coppers in this. I…I know she's not back." He pressed his brow against the glass, praying its coolness might enter his brain. "Christ, I *know* what I promised, but if you blow everything now, we're gonna lose her, Libs! I'm begging you—"

"James."

He looked up. Toby was gesturing to the computer. "Hang on just one second. What is it?"

"My Tel Aviv contact found a noise on that CD upload—a howl, like somebody fooling around, maybe pretending to be a ghost. But recorded, mechanised. Then people screaming and laughing. Do you know what that is?"

McBride stared at him. He'd sat in another of Sim Carlyle's clubs in the

Cowgate, night after hard-drinking night, hearing that racket with distant pity for poor tourist fools. Half ten on the dot. “The Black Cat,” he said. “Backs onto the town’s oldest graveyard. They guide groups in there on haunted-city walks. Then they leave them alone, switch the floodlights off and play a stupid bloody ghost howl.”

Toby almost smiled. “You’re sure?”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

“Right. Then he’s had all his chances, the bastard. To hell with cooperation. He knows you, but he doesn’t know me. May I speak with Libby?”

“You want to…” McBride hesitated for a second. Then, as if hypnotised, he held out the receiver.

Toby took it gently. He put one hand on McBride’s shoulder. “Ma’am? My name is Tobias Leitner. I’m a special agent working with James on the case of your daughter’s abduction. I’m sorry we failed to retrieve her last night. But we know now where she’s being held, and it’s my intention to enter that place undercover and get her back.”

He sounded so calm. For a moment McBride allowed the assurance in his voice to wash over him. He closed his eyes and heard Libby too falling under the spell, the edge of hysteria fading from her voice. McBride drifted away from her half-heard questions, Toby’s measured, steady answers. He remembered his dreams—searing nightmares about Grace woven through with flashes of how it would have been if Toby had followed him to bed.

“James?”

He jolted upright. Toby had hung up the phone and was crouching in front of him. “Yes,” he said roughly. “Sorry. Is she all right?”

“She’s surviving. Are you?”

“I’m not sure. Toby, what the hell type of undercover are you going to pull in the Black Cat?”

Toby shrugged. “That’s easy. If Carlyle has a buyer, I can be a better one. I’ll break any deal he’s made. I’ll do better than that—I’ll wear a wire and get enough evidence to bring the whole lot of them down.”

“For that we’ll need a surveillance van and—”

“Yes. A team to intercept and raid if anything goes wrong. I can take a handful of men off the Zvi op to help out, but we do have to involve your department too. Are there people there you can trust?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anymore. Toby, if Carlyle’s lot make you, they’ll skin you alive.”

“They won’t. I’m a dark-eyed, dark-skinned foreigner with more dirty cash pouring out of my pockets than they’ve ever seen in their lives. They won’t look

any further. Now, I’m going to make the calls I have to, and you’re about to take a shower. I meant what I said last night, James—you’re bloody gorgeous—but you look like you slept in a hedge.”

Chapter Nine

McBride and Leitner made their way into the Harle Street squad room almost unnoticed. No mean feat in an office with glass walls, but everyone from the duty sergeant to the most recent temp was clustered round the bank of video monitors at the far end of the room.

McBride stopped and felt Toby come to a halt just off his shoulder. He was not used to having backup. Andrew had been so much his junior, and he himself over the years had become so fiercely—so bitterly—independent, he hadn't allowed any such assistance near him.

Toby said, very quietly, "Want me to do the talking?"

McBride smiled. "While I go and hide in the gents'? Very tempting. Better not, though." He cleared his throat. "Morning, everybody."

They all swung round like meerkats. Andrew Barclay was in the back row. His arms were folded over his chest, his handsome face pale. When he saw McBride, he made a brief, truncated gesture, as if he would somehow shoo him out of the room. But it was too late for that—Lila Stone was straightening from her hunched pose over one monitor, a bleach-blonde Aphrodite rising from her foam. "Detective Inspector McBride," she spat. Her lips were actually blue round the edges with rage: McBride could hazard a guess that *James* was dead and gone forever. "I was about to issue a warrant for your arrest. What in God's name have you done?"

McBride looked with interest at the monitor screens. On each of them, his fuzzy image was frozen, in various attitudes of breaking into his own HQ. Last night had been a last-ditch raid. Toby had taken out the alarms between them and their goal, but that had been all—no time to disable the CCTV. It hadn't mattered then.

It didn't now. McBride stepped forward. "What I've done," he said, to Lila and to all of them, "is stolen as much of the evidence as I could in the case of Sim Carlyle. I took it, and I handed it over to him last night. He's got my daughter. That was meant to be her ransom, but it didn't work."

Lila Stone gaped. It was Andrew who broke the dead silence that had fallen. "Jim," he said hoarsely. "Carlyle's got *Gracie?*"

"Yeah. I'm sorry I didn't tell you, Andy. I've just been—"

But McBride got no further. Andrew strode across to him. He gripped McBride's shoulders for a second, then hauled him into a rib-cracking bear hug. "Jesus Christ! What can we do?"

"Detective Sergeant!" Lila barked. "McBride is under arrest. I need two of you—Davies, Royston—to escort him downstairs immediately and confine him while I decide what to do."

McBride pushed Andrew gently back. He looked at the floor. There was no reason, he knew, for his former teammates to do anything other than obey. He'd walked away from them, pursued a solitary path. Abandoned them… But after a long moment, Lenny Royston said, incredulity painting his Ormiston burr, "Your bairn's been *abducted*, McBride?"

"Yes. He snatched her to punish me for trying to bust his Grassmarket op."

"How long?"

How long? McBride fought the urge to close his eyes. *Forever. Since Arthur's Seat was live and blasting lava into the heavens.* "Two nights. Three days."

The silence that followed was not dead at all. McBride hadn't heard it in a long, long time, and he got his head up to listen. Lenny was looking across at his partner, Davies, and Davies in his turn leaned forward to glance first at Andrew and then the others. This was the electric hush of a good team deciding—not what to do, but how to do it. Of widely disparate men drawing together, coming to agreement.

Because, apart from Lila, everybody in this room knew Grace. Things had been different with McBride back then. His colleagues had followed the progress of Libby's pregnancy with the usual jokes and dire warnings. And when he'd brought the child in for the first time, a huge-eyed scrap in her white woollen blanket, every one of them had gathered around, even the tough bastards, awkward and grinning. "I need…" he began, and then his voice died.

A hand pressed the small of his back. Even through his thick coat, McBride felt the strength of it, the comfort. "We need to set up a sting," Toby went on for him, and again McBride was aware of that group consensus, the ripple of energy as attention shifted and refocused. Something else too—the clicking of a door, although no one spared the newcomer a glance. "We think Carlyle will try to traffic Grace tonight. I will go in as a buyer with a better offer, try to get her out quietly that way."

"What, just…*buy* her?"

That was Royston. Toby nodded and received an approving grunt. An economical lot, these Scots, although not in the way of their national reputation. They just liked to do their jobs as simply and directly as they could and with as

little drama. “If I fail,” Toby continued, “we can’t risk leaving the child with him any longer. We need a team to monitor the body mic I’ll be wearing and another to keep surveillance all round the building. He’s holding her somewhere in the Black Cat club’s premises in Cowgate. If he or anyone else tries to leave with her—”

“Excuse *me*.”

McBride jumped. He saw his reflex echoed in a few bodies around the room: they’d almost forgotten Lila Stone. In that room of northern brogues, where Toby’s softly accented English blended too, her knife-blade vowels carved a chilly track for themselves. She was on her feet but looked ready to drop, as if the last recognisable sands of her world were running out. “May I ask who the devil are you?”

Toby frowned. “I’m sorry, Superintendent? I believe we were introduced to each other at—”

“No. I mean who the devil are you to walk into my offices, take over my team and start to set out some half-baked plan for an operation I haven’t even sanctioned, let alone—”

A new voice rang out. Calm. Female. No, not new at all—utterly familiar. “Oh, now, Lila. I hate to disagree with you in public, but it’s not a half-baked plan. I think it’s quite a decent one myself.”

The echo of a thousand mornings here in this very room. Turning, McBride saw Royston, McKay, Davies, all of them—hearing it too, and with the same thoughts, the same surmise dawning. My God. Yes—there was Amanda Campbell, leaning on the wall by the whiteboard as if she’d never been gone. He blinked and rubbed a hand over his eyes. Superintendent Campbell, or *ex*, except that…

She was in uniform.

“Aye,” Campbell said, returning McBride’s openmouthed stare with a half-apologetic little shrug. “Assistant Chief Constable now, I’m afraid. I’m very sorry, Lila—they more or less drafted me, after this business with Ambassador Zvi.”

Lila gulped audibly. “I don’t… Ma’am, I don’t understand.”

“I know. I’ll speak to you privately in just a minute, once I’ve sorted out this matter of—”

“No.” Lila was shaking her head. “You have no business sorting out anything in here. This is my department.”

“Where you’ve been so busy kicking backsides, you probably haven’t had time to check your inbox and voice mails. Some mornings are like that around here. You’ve been suspended, Superintendent. Now do us both a favour and

don’t make me go into details in front of this mob.”

For a moment McBride was afraid Lila would fall down in a fit. “You have no authority—” she began, then broke off, visibly remembering that ACC Campbell had. “This operation Leitner’s proposing—I’ve heard nothing about it from General Sharot. It hasn’t been sanctioned by Lothian and Borders either, as far as I know.”

“That’s right. As far as you know. But since you’ve been taken off duty, pending the outcome of General Sharot’s investigation, you have to consider the possibility that there are things your superiors may not wish to tell you at present.”

Lila’s mouth dropped open. Then she gathered herself and, with more composure than McBride would have given her credit for, surged through her surrounding officers and left the room.

Amanda watched her go. Her expression was almost regretful, as if she’d just witnessed the circus leave town. “There goes trouble,” she said thoughtfully. She turned to face her men. “If any of you enjoyed that, stop. She’s right. I am in charge now, and she has been suspended—but as for official sanction, you only have mine. If anyone here’s uncomfortable with that, he’s free to leave now.”

No one moved. McBride, breathing shallowly, vibrantly aware of Toby’s steady presence behind him, felt as if tides of time had closed over his head. He wanted to let them—to be back in that old world where his colleagues still liked him and Superintendent Campbell ruled Harle Street. Amanda looked utterly at home in her old place by the whiteboard. Her eyes were serene and determined. “Very well,” she said at length. “In that case I suggest we go out and find this bastard that’s taken my goddaughter.”

Gearing up for an op. McBride had forgotten how that felt. Not pulling on fancy-dress tartans, but Kevlar vests, and no longer in proud solitude, but as part of a unit whose acceptance had once given him equal pride. Dark had come down outside the bright Harle Street windows. The squad room was mutedly buzzing with voices and life—equipment being checked, strategies run through once, twice, a third time to be sure. Toby had gone to meet with General Sharot and get clearance for his part in the night’s activities. McBride, if he couldn’t be there at his shoulder in Sim Carlyle’s club, would do the next best thing and listen to every word and breath of him from the surveillance van. He went to join Amanda at the table where she was studying spread-out floor plans of the Black

Cat's premises. "You got hold of those fast."

She nodded. "Guy at the Land Registry owes me a favour or two. Couriered them over on a bike."

That was the difference, McBride thought, scanning the plans for himself. An officer like Campbell had men and women all over the city who owed her a favour or two, and not only that but they liked her enough to act fast when she called them in. Not looking at her, he said, "Is this permanent, then? The honour of your presence?"

"I don't know." She traced the line of a wall with one finger. "Whether it is or it isn't, James, you're going to have to accustom yourself. Bosses like Lila Stone—not Lila herself, I don't think. She's made the kind of mistake they don't forgive—but her breed… They are the future for this police force. Not me."

"Christ."

"There's a lot of good in Lila. People of her sort—the cost-cutters, the politicians—will still be around when this scythe of a recession's finally passed over us and gone. And so will their departments." Amanda straightened and looked at him. "Part of Lila's trouble was that she didn't have a senior officer she could trust. She didn't have the trust of her most senior DI." McBride looked down. *She didn't damn well deserve it* died on his lips. He'd hated her from day one, hadn't he? Had never given her a chance. "God, James," Amanda went on. "Was it because she's a woman? You worked with me like a lamb for ten years."

"Aye, but you're—"

"What? Old-fashioned? A lesbian?" She was smiling at him a little, her narrow, clever mouth curling up at one corner. "Is that easier, for someone like you? I often did wonder."

"Someone…someone like me?"

"Mm. Poor Libby. Poor you, if that's the game you've had to play. Is it over now?"

"Amanda, I've…absolutely no idea what it is that you're talking about."

"Oh, right." She nodded at him genially, then returned to her study of the maps. "Then you'll no' have noticed how grand of a shine that nice Israeli officer's taken to you. And if you have, you'll no' care."

McBride drew a breath, though with very little idea what he would do with it when it came out. His heart was thudding hard. Images flashed around the edges of his terror for Grace: Toby, a reflection in his kitchen window, and then a reality breathing in his arms. Toby waiting for him when he'd stumbled out of bed that morning, all lit up with the beautiful fires of his rage. McBride had thought only he in all the world could see that shine…

"Amanda," he began, but got no further. The squad-room door opened wide.

Campbell, McBride and all the other officers stopped what they were doing, and then after a small tense pause, a ripple of laughter went round. “Och, the pair of you,” Amanda said, her expression a mix of amusement and disgust. “I’d arrest you both on sight.”

McBride couldn’t even find a smile. It was too unsettling, to see Toby like this. His disguise—Andrew Barclay’s too, though McBride had never noticed him leave—was hardly flamboyant. Incredibly subtle, rather, and depending for more than half its effect on the way Toby held himself, the new set of his shoulders and his head. He was wearing a suit finely calculated to imitate expense and miss the mark. His hair was oiled and slicked back. He was so dark his five-o’clock shadow had come in with piratical vigour. He looked…sleazy.

And still McBride would have given his arm and a week’s pay to drag him off to bed. At this moment, in the middle of all this hell. What had Amanda said? *“Someone like you.”* Someone queer, then. Homosexual. He shoved his own old word for it out of his mind, and then his father’s stone-cold, heart-killing label.

Someone gay. It still wasn’t right, but it would do for McBride for now. It would do until better days. “Bloody hell, Toby,” he said in awe. “I’d have walked past you in the street.”

“And kept right on going, if you’d any sense,” Toby returned, a sudden smile restoring him. “And your young colleague—is he sufficiently vile for you too?”

McBride dragged his eyes off Toby. Andrew had on a similar uniform, except he’d transformed into the kind of flash young club lout McBride often found groaning and vomiting in the Harle Street holding cells of a Sunday morning. For the moment he was glancing around, too pleased with himself and his badness to carry it off, but when Toby gave him a tiny admonitory look, he dropped back into role. And now McBride did laugh—a snorting, almost painful rumble. “Aye. He’s horrendous. What the devil did you do to him?”

“Very little. This lovely suit and a lesson in personal deportment.” Toby turned to Campbell. “With your permission, ma’am. I will need immediate backup inside the club, and DS Barclay volunteered. He hasn’t been seen with DI McBride during the Carlyle investigation, and—”

“And I wanted to make it up to you, Jim,” Andrew interrupted him, blushing brick-red.

What was McBride meant to say to that, in front of the whole squad? Eyebrows were on the rise, none more expressively than ACC Campbell’s.

It didn’t matter. Not the audience, anyway. What mattered was the young man’s willingness to risk his life to rescue Grace. “There’s nothing to make up for,” McBride said quietly. “Nothing at all. But thank you, Andy.”

Almost eight o'clock. The Black Cat would be open. In another hour or so enough of the right type of customers would have gathered for Sim Carlyle to conduct his business discreetly. For Toby and Andrew to enter the premises without drawing attention too, and so Campbell's men bided their time.

Behind a partition screen, McBride helped Toby take off his shirt. Once that was done, and the garment set aside on the desk, McBride picked up the wire spool the Harle Street technician had given him. Both he and Toby kept their attention rather intently fixed on the body mic as McBride placed it carefully just beneath Toby's right collarbone. He tore two strips of tape off their roll and pressed them to Toby's smooth skin, securing the wire. "There. That should do it. How's your shoulder?"

"The muscles are seizing a bit now, but it's all right. I had the dressings changed while I was off becoming Viktor Maralek."

McBride nodded in approval. Yossi Maralek was real enough, and his shadowy tribe of cousins enough of a legend in the trafficking underworld to have a ring of truth if Sim Carlyle asked. "Who's Andy going to be?"

"Oh, he's a nameless nobody tonight." McBride handed Toby his shirt and held it while he stiffly shrugged into it. "Much more than that to you, though, James. Do you want to tell me about it?"

"Much to my surprise, I do. I will later—after the op, when you're safe home. But…it's over. Okay?"

Toby watched him in silence for a moment, taking in this answer and McBride's reasons for giving it. "Okay," he said softly.

"Should I wire him up too?"

"No. We don't really need it, and if things go wrong, it gives him plausible deniability. He can get away."

But I want you to be able to get away. Where's your deniability? McBride closed his lips tight on these words. He'd sent scores of men into danger, walked into it himself scores more. Anxious questions never helped. "Thanks," he said. "He's a good lad."

Both of them glanced across the room. Andrew was standing in the window, his back turned, his head bowed thoughtfully. As they watched, he straightened a bit. "It's snowing," he said. "Properly this time. Had anyone else apart from me forgotten it's Christmas Eve?"

A few of them had. Not the ones with kids—McBride saw Lenny and a couple of the others glance at their watches, surreptitiously hopeful. Not Amanda either, McBride was sure—she and Jenny always made a quiet, fervent

thing of it. “I remember, Andy,” she said, laying aside the gun she was checking. “Make your good wishes to one another now, if you like—just in case it’s after midnight before we get done.”

McBride glanced out into the dark, where big white flakes were whipping past the streetlights. He knew what she meant. *Say it now, in case you don’t come back at all.* He nodded wryly at the gruff and offhand twenty-first-century blessings being tossed his way; threw back a few in kind. Then he turned to Toby. “Happy… Oh.”

Toby smiled. He hadn’t finished fastening his shirt. Even in his Maralek guise, to McBride he was such a perfect sight that he wanted to fall into his arms.

Toby held them out for him. Professional to his back teeth, he’d chosen the one spot in Lila’s glass office from which neither he nor McBride could be seen, though McBride only noticed this slowly, locked in his embrace: he was lost, would have seized him and kissed him on the Scott Monument if that was where they’d happened to be. “Ah, James,” Toby said to him unsteadily, “it’s last night of Chanukah too, if that makes you feel better. But it’s all just a festival of lights. Your city is a city of lights, and you’re the brightest of them. I’ll never forget what I found here.”

Chapter Ten

The heart of the city was slowing. Patches of frenzied activity continued still, and would to the bitter end—shops along Princes Street holding wide their doors until ten for frantic last-minute shoppers; clubs like Carlyle's that would pulsate into the small hours with garish life. Nevertheless McBride could feel it. As the surveillance van nosed through the crowds on the George IV Bridge and into the Cowgate's network of closes and wynds, he knew that for every reveller out on the cobbles tonight, thousands of ordinary, tired men and women were going home. Closing themselves in with their families or their solitude. Starting the sweet, dumb, commercialised pantomime of Christmas with their kids.

"James?"

The van was slowing. McBride looked across to Campbell, sitting opposite him in its rear. In her council worker's overalls and the high-vis vest, which would ironically make her invisible, she looked the part. She'd tucked her hair into a black woolly hat. "Grace will be all right, you know."

McBride swallowed painfully. He knew he looked the part himself, in donkey jacket and vest. Maybe this was what he should have gone in for—patching up road surface from a council truck. Then the world—a tiny, boring world, but sacred and intact—would still be on its axis. "I thought I'd know too," he said hoarsely. "Always did know in the past, if she'd hurt herself or anything was wrong. But now I can't get any sense of her at all."

"Doesn't mean anything. Just hold on."

Lenny Royston, sour faced and convincing at the wheel, pulled the van up just behind the plastic barricades where genuine roadworks had been going on. Amanda nodded in approval, and the two sound technicians they'd brought with them went to work, hitching up recording equipment and headsets. McBride and Campbell got out into the snow, leaving Lenny and his partner in the van's front seats, beginning their surveillance. "This'll do," Campbell said, frowning critically into a hole in the tarmac. "McKay and Janice Dee have got the other exit."

"Dee? The Glasgow lass? I thought she'd swung Christmas leave."

"She had." Campbell tugged down the edge of her hat and looked more like a scrawny wee navvy than ever. "She came rushing in to join us when she heard

our Andy was going undercover." She smiled, stepping out of the way of a group of laughing hen-party girls, snowflakes melting in their feather boas. "All sorts of people trying to look out for their fellas tonight, eh, James?"

"Och, Manda! I…I just met him, all right? He's been good to me—so good I don't know how I'll ever pay him back—but…"

"DI McBride?" The sound tech stuck his head round the door of the van. "I'm picking up a signal on Agent Leitner's mic."

McBride almost bulldozed Campbell down. He stopped himself, mortified, putting out a hand to catch her. She waved off his apology, pushing him ahead of her into the van. "I know, I know. You just met."

The voice on the wire didn't sound like Toby's at all. McBride, settling onto a stool in the truck, bidding his hands not to shake on the headset, listened in bewilderment. A top undercover man himself in his Edinburgh pond, McBride wasn't sure he'd last five minutes with Mossad. This was Viktor Maralek he was hearing. His intonation bore no resemblance to Toby's Israeli lilt: Yossi was Slovenian, and so was Toby now. McBride was sure the accent was authentic. Not that Carlyle would know or care: he'd be happy if his client fell under his broad definition of *foreign.*

And McBride could pick out Carlyle, even through the roar and clatter of the crowd. That was one voice he'd always know, and Carlyle had no thought of disguising it. There he was in the background, cackling and shouting with his mates. He sounded elated. A terrible chill seized McBride's guts as he tried to think what might make a hard-eyed psycho like that sound so damn happy.

Then, he wasn't entirely a psycho, was he? According to his lights, he was a businessman. He wasn't going to kill the goose. Amanda pressed a knee to his in the confines of the van, and both listened intently while Toby closed in on the target.

It happened fast. So far all McBride had heard was background conversation, Toby chatting idly to the barman, then exchanging a word or two with other punters in the crowd. Then suddenly Carlyle's voice was loud in the mic, and Toby—Viktor, a toneless stranger, the voice of a shark if one had decided to talk—was saying, "Hey, Sim. I hear you have merchandise."

Amanda almost dropped her notebook. McBride too felt his heart lurch into his throat. But after a moment's terror, he understood what Toby was doing. Understood it was a brilliant move—perhaps the only one. To go straight in without preliminaries, with a grand assumption Carlyle would know exactly what he meant. That he had the right to be asking. Leave no time for suspicion, for wonder.

A silence had fallen around Carlyle's table. McBride could see it as clearly

as if he'd been there—the ring of surprised faces, the suspension of activity. "Who the hell are you?"

"Maralek. Viktor Maralek." Perfect—just the right tone of disgust. Someone like Carlyle, someone with *merchandise*, should know him. There was a faint rustle, the sound of a powerful, confident man sitting down uninvited. "Well? I heard you had it. Did you make the deal already?"

"What's it to you if I did?"

"No. What is it to *you,* Sim? I've heard of you too. You don't hand over goods like that to the first bidder."

Another silence. Then Carlyle said, in tones of imperfectly hidden surmise, "You said your name was—what? Maralek?"

"That's right. Not gone deaf from all this shit music you play in your clubs, have you?"

A smile in Toby's voice. Not a nice one. And the bait was taken—McBride saw Carlyle's throat gape helplessly wide. "What's your budget, then, mate?"

"Half again what your first man put down."

And that was right too. *Double* would have gone too far, triggered Sim's alarms with its extravagance. Maybe smacked of desperation. As it was, all McBride heard after that was Carlyle's flat instruction, "Come with me," and the sounds of two men making their way through a noisy room to somewhere quieter.

And sirens.

McBride frowned. He clamped the headset harder to his ears, then saw Amanda was laying hers down. Doing the same, he listened. Three or four—no, five, another one lifting its voice into the wailing chorus. He wouldn't have paid them a moment's attention except they were so suddenly close. Coming closer. "Amanda…"

"Don't worry. Someone else's party going wrong, I should think."

"Aye." A punch-up, a jumper on the bridge, some other traditional festivity. McBride put his headset back on in time to hear Toby ask coldly if the package was intact. His stomach lurched at the implication, but Sim snarled back, just as frosty, "D'ye think I'm a fool? That's what you pay for. There's no' a finger mark on it."

McBride let his brow rest for a moment on his hands. "Oh, Gracie…"

"James!"

He snapped upright. Amanda had seized his shoulder. He turned to look up at her. "What?"

"Trouble."

He tore off his headset. Through the front screen of the van he saw Royston

and Davies coming to attention. Snow was billowing past the windscreen, beginning to form spirals in the wind. Lit up in red and blue… "Amanda, what the hell—"

"I don't know. Squad cars. Four or five of them, pulling up just down the road."

McBride grabbed the back of the driver's seat and leaned to look out. Christ, yes—Lothian and Borders bearing down in all its glory, all the racket and fanfare Campbell's team had worked so hard to avoid. The sirens were a wolf-pack howl. He met Amanda's eyes, watching her come to the same conclusion at the very same instant. "Oh no. *Lila*."

His discarded headset crackled. McBride snatched it up. Not a crackle—a thundery flutter, as if the cloth near the mic had been seized. A short, intense hush, the sound of the sirens coming through the wire. Then Carlyle's panicky snarl: "What's that noise, then, Maralek? What the fuck is *that?*"

"How should I know?" Toby sounded unfazed. In his mind McBride saw him, lifting one broad shoulder in a shrug. His eyes would be calm. His mouth would be ghosting a smile. "Maybe you forgot to pay a bill."

Gunshots roared down the wire. McBride jerked back helplessly, the headset clattering to the floor. He yanked it back up and listened again—frantically clamping one earpiece flat to his skull—but Toby's mic was dead.

McBride leapt into the street. Once there, he fixed himself, a rock around which chaos instantly began to part itself and flow. The doors to the Black Cat were wide open, disgorging a stream of panicked bodies. The bouncers were trying to keep order, but the club was tiny; a gunfight in there would sound like the end of the world and put everyone into the crossfire.

Police cars were still arriving. One of them skidded on the snow and screeched to a broadside halt three feet from McBride. He scarcely bothered to look. He was waiting, listening. The squad-car doors flew open, and somehow he was sharing the kerb and the blizzard with Lila Stone and the chief constable for all of Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders. He'd had bad dreams like that. Assuming this was real, he growled, "What have you done, Lila?"

She ignored him. All her attention was fixed desperately on the brass she'd brought with her. The CC was watching her in his turn with an intense and hawklike interest. "I told you, sir," she gasped. "This is an unauthorised raid."

"DI McBride? You in charge here?"

On another night McBride might have been flattered the CC recognised him. For now he was just waiting, listening. "Nn-nn," he grunted, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at the van. "Campbell."

"Aye, and it was going fine until you lot came blazing in… Oh, Lila. I might

have known."

McBride let Campbell and all the rest of them fade into static. The CC had brought serious heat with him: all the way up the wynd, police marksmen were taking position behind the open doors of their cars. To what end, McBride wasn't sure, unless they intended to shoot their way through the frightened crowd still spilling onto the pavements. Still too many of them for him to make his move, and he didn't yet know where to go. He was waiting, listening. Vaguely he heard the CC's ominous rumble. "You mean you disrupted an operation set up by my division's most trusted senior officer?" Then the gunfire came again.

A short, sharp exchange. The marksmen crouched, cocking their rifles. The crowd surged, screams piercing the clamour, but McBride could see a gap. And he had a destination—the first floor.

Amanda was in front of him. "James. No. Don't you dare."

Everything I've got's in there, Manda. My kid, my partner.

Toby.

He couldn't say any of it. He put her aside—gently, almost into the arms of the CC. And then he ran.

The club was almost empty. The music boomed weirdly to a vacant floor, coloured lights and strobes whirling in dead air. A handful of terrified punters still crouched under tables, huddled against walls: he ignored them, scanning the darkness. Only one exit could lead to the upper floors. Unshipping his weapon from under the donkey jacket, he made for it, cautiously pushing wide the doors.

There was a body on the stairs. For a moment McBride felt only distant rage, a copper's grief for the civilian dead; this poor lad in his shiny suit had probably just been on his way back from the gents'. McBride bent to check for a pulse, found none and began to step over him.

A strobing beam from the bar swept over the fallen man's peaceful face. Air left McBride's lungs. His damaged knee gave, and he grabbed at the banister to keep from falling. "Oh God, Andrew. Andy!"

Another bark of gunfire from the floor above. For an instant McBride couldn't take it in—couldn't move for the stony paralysis of grief inside him. Then he heard Grace scream.

He lurched to his feet. Christ, what a noise she made—like a cat picked up by its tail. Oh, she was Libby's girl, all right, and his; she sounded, more than anything, pissed off. Like a flare in the dark, that cry. McBride briefly touched

Andrew’s hair and ran again.

A narrow corridor ran from the top of the staircase to a set of double doors. The doors had porthole windows. Flattening himself to the wall, McBride took his Walther in both hands, snapping off the safety. He could see Sim Carlyle—panicked, pale, but not too much of a cornered rat to be enjoying himself. Worse things than coke and E got dealt around this club. That was a crystal-meth face, McBride reckoned, Sim not above sampling his own wares. His gaze was glittering and dead. His weapon—a dirty-looking Parabellum, adapted to take hollow points—was trained on Toby Leitner.

Toby was unarmed. He was bruised and daubed with blood, but he looked utterly serene. As if he was playing out his life’s last purpose, finding his path and his peace… When Sim moved, he did too, just a little, always facing him. McBride saw why. Grace was behind him. She was at once clinging to his coattails and peering round them at Carlyle, her face creased like a wildcat’s. From what McBride could lip-read, she was giving Carlyle what-for in her ma’s best Glaswegian guttersnipe dialect. Toby kept pushing her back, one hand gently clamped to her bright head. He was shielding her—with his flesh, with his bone. Carlyle would have to shoot through him to get at her.

McBride kicked the doors open. Carlyle swung round. And despite everything—despite even poor Andrew, discarded like a rag doll on the stairs—McBride gave him a moment. He said, soft and fast, “Put it down for me, Sim.”

But Sim jerked the pistol’s muzzle up. McBride knew a moment of exquisite relief. No more reason in this world now why he shouldn’t shoot this fucker dead: he nodded, as if they had come to an agreement. “Fine by me. Toby, don’t let my bairn watch this.”

Toby hoisted her off the floor. She fought him for an instant, then wailed and hid her face of her own accord. Toby wrapped an arm around her head. And McBride, once the girl’s eyes and ears were shielded, shot Sim Carlyle through the heart.

Unsteadily he holstered his gun. He stood staring at the corpse he’d just created. What did he do, when the game was over? What did normal men do?

“James!”

He turned. He’d never heard that deep, warm voice with a break in it. Toby was holding out an arm to him, the one not wrapped round his wriggling child. Grace too was reaching out for him, leaning so far she was ready to fall.

“Gracie!” He ran to catch. He grabbed the girl, and Toby grabbed him, pulling them both close and tight. “Oh God, Toby. Thank you. Thank you.” Grace’s arms clamped round his neck, a scrabbling, strangling-monkey embrace, the sweetest pain he’d ever felt. “Grace, you wee tick. Are you all right?”

“Aye! Toby promised he’d no’ let them hurt me!”

“I wouldn’t have, James. Not with a breath left in my body.”

McBride raised his head to meet Toby’s eyes. “I know,” he said wonderingly. “God. Why?”

“Because I—”

The double doors banged suddenly wide. McBride and Toby reacted as one —coming shoulder to shoulder, dropping Grace to the floor behind them, closing ranks tight. The bloodstained figure falling into the room did not look dangerous, but McBride’s nerves were wound hair-trigger tight, and his gun was in his hand and cocked before he knew what he was doing. “No!” Toby snapped, bearing his arm down. “It’s Barclay!”

“Jesus Christ!” McBride dropped the gun, reflexively snapping the safety back on before he let it go. He took a couple of strides forward and stood staring down at his poor partner, who had crashed to his knees a yard away and was staring up at him, propped on one hand, the other clasped to his stomach. “Andy, you bastard—I couldn’t find your pulse.”

“Well, you couldn’t have looked very bloody hard!” Andrew bellowed. Then his supporting arm gave, and he crumpled facedown onto the carpet. “Oh, Jim. Help me…”

Chapter Eleven

Harle Street, an hour before midnight. Plenty of late shifts McBride had worked here: it should have felt ordinary to him, dull. He sat at his desk. From here he could see and hear—glass walls, open doors—a handful of small dramas playing themselves out. Half a dozen tableaux. McBride cared about all the people in them, but he wasn't wanted onstage just for now.

He rested his chin on his hands. Over in the corner, the two sound techs were crowing and high-fiving each other, so presumably the tapes from Toby's wire were good. Royston, Davies, McKay and the others were grabbing their coats, waving at him distractedly as they scurried for the door: he nodded and lifted a hand in return. Outside Lila's old office—and axes fell hard around here; even her nameplate had been stripped from the door—Amanda Campbell was pinned down under fire, making small placating gestures at her partner, Jennifer, who'd been waiting for them on their return. Enough of Jenny's tirade drifted through for him to piece together the whole. "You swore to me it was a desk job! Then I phone to find out why you've not come home, and they tell me you're on an armed siege in the Cowgate!"

He repressed a smile. All sorts of lives finding their balance again. Andrew Barclay getting a bullet dug out of him in the Royal, expected to be fine. In an office over the hall, Toby Leitner with the duty sergeant, who was respectfully taking down his report.

And right in front of him, Libby, clutching her daughter as if she would squeeze the marrow from her bones. She'd been waiting at Harle Street too, hand in white-knuckled hand with Jennifer. Libby had Grace on her lap. Her face was buried in her hair. The child's limbs were sticking out at awkward angles with the force of her embrace. Her voice came, small and winded, out of Libby's jumper: "Ma, I cannae breathe."

"I dinnae bloody care!"

Two Glaswegian guttersnipes. McBride watched them in satisfaction. He would take to his grave with him the memory of carrying Grace up the steps of Harle Street and into Libby's outstretched, frantic arms. He said, "She's not been hurt. At least—I've asked her, and I think she's old enough to know what I…"

"McBride!"

That was his daughter, blushing furiously, mortified by both her parents. "McBride?" he said. "You called me *Daddy* on those tapes."

"Aye, wi' a gun to my head."

"Gracie! He did not have…"

"No. It's a figure of speech." She gave him the shadow of her old wicked smile. "He just told me to make it sound good."

McBride shivered. That was familiar. He could hardly bear to think of Carlyle near her: he'd kill him again if he could. And debonair and bright with mischief or not, she'd been at his mercy for two nights and three days. "I think she's all right, Libs. But I don't know if she understands."

Libby raised her head. She said, her voice muffled with tears, "Och, we've had *the talk*." McBride's eyebrows went up. "Well, if we'd waited for you to do it, she'd have been at university."

He sighed. "Fair enough. Listen—Amanda's asked Dr. Taylor to come up here. She's one of the Royal's top paediatricians. She can check Gracie over here so she doesn't have to go to hospital, and then if everything's all right, you can take her home." He glanced up at movement outside. "Good. That's her now. I… I'll close these blinds for you, and I'll clear out. Then—"

"Jimmy." He turned round from trying to unfasten the tangled cord. Libby was looking at him—not oddly, but in a way McBride hadn't seen for a long time. "I'm sorry," she said. "Sorry for a lot of things."

"Jesus, Libs—*you're* sorry…"

"I know. A lot of blood's gone under our bridge. But…when you get done here, if you want to come back to the house, you'd be welcome. You could come back for Christmas. Just if you want."

He stared at her. His mouth had dried out. His heart was pounding in his chest like something trapped and tearing at its bars.

He loved her. He loved their child and would set down his life for either of them at a second's notice. But there was nothing in him that responded to that look of hers, that smile. Family life had been a dream for him, a ready-measured suit he had struggled all his life to grow into. What had he wanted from it? Love, he supposed—and he'd got that, as a father, in the companionship he and Libby had achieved at their very best. But as for passion—the fire he had once been young enough to think would spring up and fill his whole life, revealing its point and its purpose—the nearest he had ever come to that was in a gunfight in the Freemason's Hall and tonight in a seedy club's upper room, defending Toby Leitner.

The man who had taken a bullet for him. Who had thought he was good enough to save.

A light rap sounded at the door, and Amanda ushered in Dr. Taylor, a small, sweet-faced woman who endeared herself to Grace straightaway by ignoring all the adults in the room, crouching and shaking her hand. She would be all right for now, wouldn't she? McBride would never abdicate his duties toward her again, but…

"Are you going to see Toby?"

Grace was looking straight at him—brightly, sweetly, without judgement. Libby was watching too, her expression not so sure. "Yes," he said honestly. "If I can find him."

"Well, if you do, give him this." She reached into her sleeve and pulled off a plaited bracelet from her wrist.

"Your friendship bangle? From your boyfriend in France? Are you sure?"

"He is *no'* my boyfriend. And Toby said he liked it."

McBride took the bracelet. Grace was surrounded by women now. There was half an hour left of Christmas Eve. Backing out of the room, he saw the office where Toby had been giving his report was empty. The duty sergeant was gathering up papers, putting files into drawers. He glanced up when McBride pushed open the door. "Looking for Agent Leitner, Jim?"

"Yes. Is he still here?"

"He got a phone call. Said he had to go. I don't know where, but I think they're taking the Israeli ambassador back home tonight. He might have gone straight to the airport."

Even the most desperate of last-minute shoppers had long since gone home. Most of the revellers too—Auld Reekie was putting on her white coat, and those who knew her well took cover when that ermine descended more than four inches deep. A city of culture she might be, a city of lights, but she was the ancient hill fort still, Dùn Èideann, fifty-six degrees north, a stern and icebound place in winter's heart.

Princes Street was almost deserted. The snow had stopped, but the sky was still laden with it, orange clouds brushing Arthur's Seat with their swollen bellies, parting in scraps to show vistas of diamond-hard stars. Oh God, it was cold. McBride pulled his coat collar tight over his chest, blew into his hands but couldn't begin to ward off the all-consuming chill, the hunger of the night. Anyone left out here would be eaten alive. At Turnhouse, the runways would freeze. Flights would be cancelled: Ambassador Zvi might not be able to leave.

And if he couldn't? What was McBride going to do—pursue the Israeli team out to the airport? Wait there like the end of a bad chick flick for Toby to reappear, in a rush of orchestral music, from passport control? He snorted faintly, aware he had given the scenario a few seconds' serious thought. No. If Toby had gone, so be it. He had crossed McBride's life like a meteor—that unexpected, that bright. If he'd chosen to vanish just as abruptly…

A pain went through McBride's chest, so sharp and physical he had to stop and lean against a lamppost. For a moment he wondered if all the years of desk work, drink and bad diet were about to catch up with him. It was true he'd steered clear of fried Mars bars, but there wasn't much else that was bad for him he'd turned away.

He realised his eyes were full of tears. Transiently they sharpened his vision. In the next parting of the clouds he saw, with stunning clarity, the hunter god Orion. McBride was too tired to smile, but the resemblance was good. Dashing, broad shouldered. Even a bright red bullet-wound star, though it was on the wrong side…

He stepped blindly into the middle of the road. It was one of the few times in the year when you could do so without being mown down instantly. He seldom looked up when making his way along Princes Street, always too busy threading his way through the crowds. He knew the ground-floor buildings well. Shops and restaurants and coffee bars. The upper storeys, though, with their balconies and pillars and other sombre fantasies of Gothic architecture—those were often given over to hotels. He was standing opposite one now. It was called the Sinclair, and its name meant something to McBride because this was where Harle Street recommended its political and diplomatic visitors to stay.

One high window was brilliant with candlelight. McBride didn't know much about Jewish tradition or symbolism, but he'd chased enough skinheads away from the Salisbury Road synagogue to recognise the shape of a menorah. Odd, though—he'd always seen those with seven lights. This one had nine.

He climbed the steps to the reception, not allowing himself to think what he was doing. Inside, a muted chaos hit him. Red-faced businessmen, sherry glasses in hand, were lumbering about, roaring and laughing, someone's idea of a traditional Christmas medley blasting from speakers in the lounge. McBride edged around the fringes of the party until he found the desk. "Hello. Is there a Tobias Leitner staying here?"

The girl on reception smiled at him too brightly. Maybe she'd been on the sherry too. She gave him Toby's room number without a bat of an eyelid. And this was where Harle Street sent its diplomats. He thought about pulling his badge. *At least ask who I am.* But she had turned away to answer her next

enquiry. McBride decided that, if the streams of life were for once running his way, he would let himself be carried.

Music being piped through the stairways and corridors too. The Sinclair had gone all-out this year to produce what looked like a Japanese tourist's idea of a traditional Highland Christmas—plastic holly draped from every cornice, fibre-optic trees, light-up decals of sleighs and reindeer flashing. Normally McBride didn't mind such excesses, or at any rate didn't notice, but now the commercialism clamoured at him emptily. He was tired, his nerves frayed to thin bare wire. He found himself, before he knew it, in the top-floor corridor, and then—still unsure if he was going to knock or turn and walk back into the night—outside Toby Leitner's door.

He raised his hand. He had barely brushed the woodwork with his knuckles when the door swung wide. Toby smiled at him, and he stepped into candlelit silence.

He stood in the middle of the room. It seemed to be rotating gently around him. Toby came up behind him, and the sense of vertigo increased.

"Let me take your coat."

McBride surrendered it. Only when Toby lifted its weight off his shoulders did he realise how heavy and cold it had become. He said, unable to turn round, "I thought you'd gone."

"I'm sorry. I had to take a phone call, and…when I looked back, you were with your family, with Libby and Grace. I thought you might stand a better chance if I wasn't around."

No. I never stood any chance there. "I mean…I thought you'd gone to the airport. With Zvi and the others."

"Oh, did they leave?" Toby was still close behind him; McBride felt the brush of his chuckle on his nape. "They'll be socked in till dawn. No, I'm not part of Zvi's team anymore. The call was from my Mossad *katsa.* I was cleared of any wrongdoing at an enquiry board yesterday. I've been reinstated."

McBride wasn't sure what to say. Toby hardly sounded overjoyed. "I'm pleased for you," he offered at length.

"Thank you. It doesn't bring Avrom back. The only difference for now is that I get to travel first class on my way home, and…I don't have to leave straightaway." His voice tightened. "I've got one night, James."

Finally McBride turned to face him. He was made for candlelight, McBride thought indistinctly, taking in the darkness and the brilliance of him. His hair—damp from the shower, tousled—was like raw black silk. He'd pulled a shirt on in a hurry: hadn't finished fastening it, and it was clinging here and there to his skin. The elegant planes of his face were shadowed and fervent, and the insane

thing was that he was looking at McBride as if *he* were the loveliest sight in the world. “I didn’t think you’d come,” he said. “Did you see my sign?”

“Was that…was that for me?” Toby nodded, and all McBride could think to say was, stupidly, “I thought it was seven lights. On a menorah.”

“It is, but that’s a *chanukiah.* One light for each of the eight nights of Chanukah, and the ninth to serve them. Maybe I’m not as faithless as I thought.” He paused. Very gently he brushed McBride’s snow-damped fringe back from his brow. “Tradition says they’re a reminder that miracles can happen. That we should place them in a window, to…to call wanderers home.”

Toby led him to the sofa. McBride had a moment of heart-stopping awkwardness: what should he do when they sat down together? Stick to his own end? Show Toby he wasn’t afraid or naïve by starting things off, putting an arm around him, or…

The problem didn’t arise. Leaving him there, Toby went to lean over the tray on the dressing table. McBride heard him switch the kettle on. “Oh, it’s all right. I don’t…”

“You’re freezing. I’m sorry it’s just instant. I’ll call up room service if you like.”

“No. Er, no thank you.”

“At least the milk is real.”

“Aye. I don’t know why they bother with those wee plastic pots. I think it must be just to change the colour.” McBride shook his head in bewilderment: was he really up here talking to Toby about coffee lightener? Toby seemed amused by the idea too. When he came back, he was smiling. McBride took the cup and knocked it back almost in one, realising only as he did so how much he needed it. It was scalding, absurdly good for hotel-room instant. Did Toby turn everything he touched into gold? The sudden heat set off shivers in McBride: the cup rattled in its saucer, and he couldn’t keep it still.

Toby took it from him and laid it on the floor. “There,” he said. “There, it’s all right.”

He sat on the sofa with McBride, and there wasn’t any awkwardness at all—not a second of it; no struggle over who would start. They reached for each other with the same tired, hungry gesture. “Oh, Toby,” McBride gasped over his shoulder, shakily stroking his hair. “It’s been so long since I was with another fella—properly, I mean—I’m not sure I remember what to do…”

“Whereas I spend my entire time cutting a swathe through the gay population of Israel.” Toby kissed the angle between McBride’s neck and shoulder, a place he hadn’t even known was sensitive until the caress sent a kind of thunderbolt down through him, stiffening his cock. “When were you last with one…improperly, if I can ask?”

“You can.” McBride shuddered, putting both hands on Toby’s ribs and encouraging the movement that would bear them down onto the couch. “It was very improper. Andy Barclay sucking me off in the locker room at Harle Street. Lila told him to keep tabs on me, and…” He groaned and laughed, suddenly not minding that or anything else anymore in the wonderful press of Toby’s whole weight against him. “God help him, he thought that was the most direct route.”

“*Ma pitom!* No wonder he was so keen to walk the fire for you. For Grace, anyhow.”

“Is that what he did?”

“When Lila sent the balloon up—all those sirens—he stood off Carlyle’s men, stopped them coming up the stairs. He must have known he didn’t stand a chance, and I was busy with Grace. I couldn’t help him.”

“You saved her. You both did.” Fresh joy kindled in McBride at the knowledge of his girl safe at home, probably being tucked into bed with all Libby’s pent-up maternal ferocity. He grabbed Toby’s shoulders, bearing him down into a kiss. “God, I owe you everything—her life, my own. Why?”

“I was trying to tell you when DS Barclay fell through the door at the Black Cat. I don’t even know how to tell you now…”

“Don’t. Please just show me. Show me.”

Toby thrust his hips against him, a light rocking movement that made McBride cry out. All the cold was banished from him now, a fine sweat breaking. He dared to put his hands on Toby’s backside, on the strong curves of it, encouraged when Toby gasped and pushed harder. “James, let me feel you. Is it okay…”

It was, though McBride couldn’t do more than nod frantically and push clumsy hands down to undo Toby’s belt and zip and then his own. Toby moaned, cock rising into McBride’s grasp. He shivered, seeking the contact, and McBride caressed him, letting him work up his pace and pressure until suddenly he pushed up on his arms. “Yes,” he whispered. “It’s okay. Come if you’re ready. Let go.”

But Toby’s eyes were full of tears. “I…I wish I could forget about Avi.”

“What? Somebody you loved that much? Did you live with him?”

“Yes. For six years.”

“And was that easy, over there? In Jerusalem?”

“Nn-nn. Hard like rocks.”

“Right. I bet. Listen—I had a lover once, another man. Not like Andrew—a real lover.” He brushed the tears off Toby’s cheeks with his free hand. “That was twenty-four years ago. We don’t *forget*, not if they were worth anything. Not if we are. Now…sit up a second and let me at you.”

Toby obeyed. Too startled to do anything else, McBride thought, seizing the moment. Quickly he slithered off the sofa and knelt in front of it, parting Toby’s knees. His shaft was standing ready and proud, such a sight in the candlelight that McBride caught his breath.

“Oh, James. You don’t have to…”

“I reckon I do. Shut up. Let me see if I’m still any good at this.”

Turned out, he was. It took him all his time and self-control to accommodate the length of that big cock, and after a minute he had to grasp its base to keep from choking, but that didn’t seem to bother Toby. He’d locked one hand into the nape of McBride’s shirt and was clutching a sofa cushion with the other, his arm rigid, hips bucking wildly. McBride heard his warning shout, felt him writhe to be away—but McBride wanted all of him, right or wrong, and pinned him down hard, sucking and driving his tongue down his shaft’s pulsing length until the rush came. Toby arched, a cry ripping out of him, and then he was folding into McBride’s arms, sliding halfway off the sofa before he could catch him. “All right!” McBride’s throat was sore, the tang of semen real and immediate in his mouth. “All right, I’ve got you. It’s okay.”

They knelt together, breathless, tangled. McBride felt his unsatisfied erection pressing against Toby’s thigh, and willed it to subside. Nothing to say Toby wanted to be lover as well as beloved; could still be too snared up in his memories of Avrom to wish to go further. He waited, holding him.

Slowly Toby’s breathing calmed. He got his head up. McBride’s heart shifted at the beauty of him—flushed, tearstained, an unsteady smile lighting his face. “I’d take you down here on the carpet, James,” he said at length. “But that seems uncivilised, after all we’ve been through. Will you come to bed?”

Chapter Twelve

McBride stood staring at the bathroom door. Toby had meant it—*come to bed*, not *come for a fling-down on top of the duvet*, and no way had McBride been about to inflict himself naked between the Sinclair's linen sheets without a shower. Toby hadn't wanted to wait. Said he liked the smell of a long, hard day in Auld Reekie, when McBride had described it like that. McBride could still feel the tingle on his skin where Toby had gently tried to separate him from more of his clothes, had tried to hold him back.

He had escaped, for complex reasons. There was no doubt whatever in his mind that, when he left this bathroom, he was going to let Toby fuck him, and alongside the wild excitement of that there was a fear. He and Andrew had got nowhere near to this: the last time had been Lowrie, under whispering birches at Loch Beithe. It was that long since McBride had surrendered—even come close to letting himself go.

And he wasn't what Toby was used to, was he? The bathroom was full of mirrors. McBride, naked as day, tried not to cast yet another sidelong glance at his own solid frame. There was nothing wrong with him, he told himself sternly. He looked like what he was—a hill farmer's grandson, a copper in his middle years who seldom got enough sunshine. At least he was clean. He was fine.

But he couldn't walk out there naked. There was a robe on the back of the bathroom door—should he borrow that? And if he did, should he fasten it or leave it seductively open or…

A light tap sounded on the far side of the door. McBride was so close to it that he jumped back.

"James? Are you all right in there?"

"Um. Actually, no."

"I didn't think so."

The door swung open. McBride didn't try to stop it and didn't reach for the robe. With Toby stark naked before him, he couldn't even think about himself anymore: he was dazzled, lost. Toby took him in—head to toe, smilingly, lingering over the hard-on that had never quite quit and, under this tender scrutiny, came back in full glory. "Perfect," he said and reached to take McBride's hand.

The room was softly lit, the big double bed inviting. Toby had turned back the quilt. He grabbed it as they folded down onto the mattress, pulling it over them. McBride gasped at the warmth, the feel of skin on every inch of skin. So good to have this strong male body in his arms, all springy muscle, long, tough lines, calling up uninhibited movements from his own, a power he'd never have unleashed on Libs. Toby grunted in pleasure as McBride seized him. They tussled for a few moments, strength to strength, neither of them minding the bruises. Then Toby went under, with a grin that told McBride he'd be happy to stay there if that was his partner's pleasure. "No," McBride whispered. "Please, not this time."

"What, then?"

McBride looked into the bright gaze fixed on his. He was not used to articulating his desires. He lay, his shaft wedged tight between Toby's thighs. He could give it up and come right there in one great thrust, expend the fiery ache in his balls, the hunger that felt like snakes coiling up and down his spine. Toby wanted an answer. Wanted him to say. "Go inside me," he groaned. "For God's sake. I'm going to die if you don't."

Toby's expression softened. He drew McBride down and kissed him, pushing his tongue against his teeth until McBride got the idea and opened up for him, pushing shyly back in return. Then he rolled out from under. "Lie on your side," he whispered. "With your back to me. This is best, if it's been a while for you."

"A while…" He shifted, obedient to Toby's guiding hands. "Toby, it's been bloody decades. I dunno if I can."

Toby reached over him. His warm belly pressed to McBride's back, making him shiver in pleasure. "You can," he assured him, opening the bedside drawer. "The way you saw to me earlier, I can take this slow for you now. Easy and slow."

McBride saw the lubricant, the packet of condoms, and turned his face into the pillow. He shut his eyes. Once more he had the sense of life's river running in his direction: if he could just stop fighting, he would be carried where he wanted to go. He waited, barely breathing, while Toby sheathed himself: raised his head a bit and let him slip an arm beneath it, cushioning him, holding. Strong, lube-slicked fingers caressed up the crease of his backside and then, as if aware that further preliminaries might be McBride's undoing in one way or another, pushed straight in.

McBride cried out. He struggled onto his front, sending the bedside lamp flying. Too hot, too big—he'd made a huge mistake here, and he couldn't get out a word to Toby to tell him. He'd left it too long. Too late to change his life like

this. Another yell tore from him. He clamped a grip into the pillow, onto the side of the bed. Toby must know by now—must be crushed half to death in the expulsive spasms racking him. “Oh Christ! I can’t!”

“Can. You’re just tight, *yakiri.*” McBride heard him—the strange, caressing endearment—in disbelief. He sounded a bit breathless but not fazed. Didn’t he know McBride was dying here, impaled? Failing, useless, losing everything? Hot kisses landed on the back of his neck. “Lift your hips up. Let me jerk you off.”

It’ll take more than that, McBride thought dazedly, obeying him. Still, even hearing it had sent a hot flash of relief through him—made his straining arsehole flicker and gape round its intruder—and he shifted weight onto his knees, inching his hips off the mattress. Toby’s hand found its target and took competent hold. God yes. McBride thrust desperately against him, chasing bright rags of pleasure. His movement—the tiny relaxation it brought about inside—let Toby push a bit deeper. He shifted to cover him, the weight and the pressure delicious to McBride, who subsided under it, moaning.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“Oh God. No. Never.”

Because there it was—the place deep under his tailbone that Lowrie had found, after a struggle almost volcanic as this one. McBride knew what it was now, as he hadn’t then, although why the squeeze on a tiny gland should send such fireworks up and out into his frozen midnight sky remained a mystery. Toby moved, and the sparks and colours rocketed again. McBride said, “Oh,” on a deep note of surprise and yearning. “Oh, that’s it. Do it. Fuck me.”

“Yes. You’ve opened up for me. Ah, James!”

The last coherent speech from either for a long, fierce time. Toby, good as his word, ploughed him steady and hard, driving McBride on and on, past his tightness, his fear, his conviction that the world was too bad, and he himself too unworthy in it, to be given this gift. Past the point where the feel of being fucked became not just bearable, but good, and then essential, and then there was nothing else. McBride was out in sunshine by Loch Beithe. He was at his life’s beginnings, the harm that had come to him since swept away. He stiffened and rose in Toby’s arms, shouting his name. Toby embraced him, thrusting wildly, and they came on the same instant, locked together, bearing each other up through the blazing zenith. McBride spent himself into the hot grip still clenched round his cock, pulse after ecstatic pulse, as if he’d never come before and now could never stop. He broke into sobs and felt Toby seize him and cushion his fall—thrusting still, milking him and riding him as far as he would go. Melting inside him, thank God, deep spurts and a wet heat that ended the pressure,

beached him at last on the mattress, facedown, boneless, done.

He struggled away. The movement yanked Toby's spent cock out of him, but the pain didn't matter. He had to see him, had to look into his face. Toby fought up onto his elbows as if he shared the urgency. McBride was sobbing still: he couldn't get hold of the reins. They lay staring at each other.

"James, *yakiri.*… Are you all right?"

"Yes, but…everything's different. It feels like everything's changed."

Toby reached for him. They scrambled into each other's arms. "Yes," Toby said, clumsily kissing him. "Everything's changed."

A transformed city: transformed lives. McBride sat with Toby in the window seat of their snow-lit room, high above the streets of Edinburgh. The snow had stopped, but it was thick and deep and, in this sunny dawn, unmarred. The bells of St. John's were pealing, tumbling music out over the wynds. A fantastic tracery of frost, dragons and galaxies had painted the glass: McBride pulled the duvet back over Toby's fine brown skin. "Don't get cold."

Toby smiled. "How could I be? You're like an open fire, love." Nevertheless he resettled the duvet over McBride's shoulders in return. "I think that I should wish you merry Christmas."

"Well…same to you. Is Chanukah over?"

"Yes. But I'll get you next time around."

Next time. They looked at each other, sobering. In this altered world, many things were the same. "I'll look forward to it," McBride said unsteadily. "I…do have something for you, actually. Or my kid has, anyway." He'd woken at first light and gone to fetch Grace's bracelet from the pocket of his coat. Returning, the sight of Toby sleeping had melted the knees out from under him, and he had sat in the window, chilly, unable to move. Toby had woken five minutes later and come to him drowsily, dragging the duvet. They'd watched the dawn in each other's arms.

Toby took the little strand of plaited fabric. "This is from her?"

"Yes. She told me to give it to you."

"She's a good kid." The band was too small to fit over Toby's wrist. Taking off his watch, he fastened it round the strap, tying it tight. "She was never afraid of Carlyle, you know. She just…despised him, like a little queen." He put the watch back on. "Tell her I'll always wear this."

Tell her yourself. No—show her; let her see. McBride bit the words back.

They would have been a cry—and he knew, he knew, that their one night was over. “She is a good kid,” he said hoarsely. “She deserves better than she’s had from me.”

Toby looked up. McBride could see in his dark eyes that his understanding—his grief, his acceptance—was total. He took McBride’s hand. “You know, I didn’t go to Avrom’s funeral. I couldn’t. I cut myself off from all his family too. They loved me, and I…abandoned them. I haven’t been near them since.”

McBride nodded, swallowing hard. “Things we both need to do. Oh, I wish they weren’t in different bloody countries, love.”

“Well, that’s…what I wanted to talk to you about.”

McBride frowned. They were talking about their parting, weren’t they? About goodbye, and all the good reasons why it had to be so. He understood too, just as well as Toby…

“I’m glad that Mossad cleared my name. I thought it was everything to me, to get back to that world, that life. But…I followed Avrom there really. We both did national service in the Golan Heights. We both got picked out for training. I’d never have done it without him. And now I *am* without him…”

“Oh God, Toby—”

“Ssh. Let me say this. General Sharot has connections here in the UK. He wants to start up a unit to provide intelligence and protect political visitors and refugees coming here. It may not be in the north—London, more likely—but London is closer than Jerusalem, and…”

McBride remembered to breathe. His head was spinning, sparkling light from the morning outside flowing into his lungs. “Would you…would you want that? Would you try?”

“Yes. Yes, if you wanted me to. Oh, James, don’t look at me like that—it might take months. I might not stand a chance.”

Epilogue

Being this sober was bitterly hard.

McBride pushed back from the desk he'd been flying for the last two months. At least his office was his own again—wood panels covering some of that glass—and if he wanted to sit and stare out into the sleet, that was his own business.

The bleak back end of February. Half five in the evening and darkness beginning to fall. Each day the tides of dusk encroached a little less on the afternoon's shore, but the change was so grudging, barely noticeable. Pretty much, McBride reflected grimly, like the changes being wrought on him by his daily AA meetings. Every day at two o'clock sharp. He hadn't missed a single one. Amanda Campbell quietly made gaps in his work schedule, and the Harle Street team—his friends, his colleagues—stayed, for a bunch of piss-taking Scots, astonishingly far out of his face on the matter. He was clean.

It had been the best, the worst and hardest thing he had ever done in his life. He was grateful his desk, his new office-bound life, was within the specialist human-trafficking unit Amanda had been commissioned to set up. Her daily companionship, the sense of doing something useful, had helped keep McBride on the rails. He could almost spare a pitying thought for Lila Stone, now dealing with traffic of another kind, out in the Wester Hailes council estates. Amanda's unit would one day liaise with General Sharot's new security agency.

McBride didn't let himself think about that. Despite the cold, he got up and unfastened the window sash; pushed the stiff, old frame up the few inches it would go. Damp air rushed into the room, spattering the sill with raw sleet. McBride breathed it deeply, looking down into the car park. There was an email in his inbox he simply couldn't bring himself to open. Normally he leapt on Toby's messages like the lifelines they were, his heart thudding like a bloody teenager's. The last few had been hurried, short, loving scraps sent from his BlackBerry. That meant he was on an op, most likely; McBride didn't know where. But this one was longer. Today, 27 February, was when Toby would hear back from General Sharot about the job.

McBride looked at his watch. Time he knocked off. The day's work was done. He was best keeping busy, and there was plenty to do. Now that Gracie

was once more occupying her room in his flat every weekend, and people were actually visiting him, McBride had realised what a state the place was in and was trying to rectify matters. He was, for the first time in years, buying groceries. For his kid, of course, though Grace was as likely to beg for a trip to the chippy as subject herself to her father's home-cooked. And McBride knew, far off in the back of his mind, he wanted to keep his house decent—his house, his life—in case Toby came home.

Tyres crunched on the car park's ice. Idly McBride glanced in the direction of the sound. It was coming from the entry road—unusual at this time of night, when everyone else was heading for the exits. Golden headlights appeared, turning the sleet to drifting petals on the wind, a memory or a promise of summer. McBride watched the car turn into one of the bays and come to a halt. He smiled. It was just the kind of vehicle Toby would shamelessly hire for himself on a visit, big and powerful, no expense spared.

The driver's door opened. McBride's heart lurched, and he grabbed at the windowsill, his joints trying to dissolve. He stared for a moment. Then he turned and ran out of the room, leaving the window wide.

The car park was treacherous. McBride lost traction as soon as he was off the gritted steps. He skidded but caught himself—with some grace, he thought, and was glad, because Toby was there in the sleet-storm, striding towards him. The ice soaked through McBride's shirt instantly. He couldn't feel it. He ran to close the gap. "What are you doing here? Why didn't you tell me?"

Toby's hands closed on his shoulders. "I did. Why didn't you reply?"

That unopened email. McBride looked up into the dark, anxious gaze devouring him. "Because I knew it was about the job. I…I was too bloody scared."

"Sharot called me over here at the crack of dawn this morning. I got the next flight. I thought it was just for a consultation, but—"

"For God's sake, Leitner. But what?"

"But he wants me to start straightaway. Those tapes we got on Sim Carlyle were the tip of the iceberg. They opened up a huge network of trafficking, here and on the west coast. I'll mostly be working in Glasgow, but—"

"But Glasgow's just down the road," McBride interrupted, voice rough with joy and relief. "Oh God. You're here to stay?"

"Yes. How I'll survive this filthy climate is beyond me."

"I'll keep you warm."

Toby pulled him into his arms. "You can start right now," he whispered, and McBride sought his mouth in blind passion.

The sleet turned to hail. Its sting drew McBride back to surface, and he

pulled out of the kiss, not for his own sake, but for his poor exotic lover's, shivering in his arms. "Come on," he said. "I'm done for the day. We can go."

"Don't you need to get your coat?"

McBride gave it thought. The coat, not so much, but the keys and wallet inside it might be necessary. "You're right," he said. "I'll not be a second."

He looked up at the office windows. They were brightly lit against the oncoming dark. And unmistakably outlined in their frames, in varying shapes and attitudes of excitement—Amanda, Andrew Barclay, Lenny Royston. Davies, clearly nudging McKay in the ribs. "Oh God," McBride said. "Look at that. Like a row of Gracie's bloody stuffed toys."

Toby snorted with laughter. "Want me to come in with you?"

"No way I can face them by myself. Yes, come on. And then—" he reached back and felt Toby seize his hand, invisibly to their audience in the secret space between them, "—and then I'll take you home."

About the Author

Harper Fox is an M/M author trying to make it as a full-time writer, with just that bit more urgency after being made redundant from her day job. Interesting times! In a way it’s great, because she gets to spend most of every day doing what she loves best—creating worlds and stories for the huge cast of lovely gay men queuing up inside her head. She lives in rural Northumberland in northern England and does most of her writing at an old kitchen table in her back garden, often with blanket and hot water bottle.

She lives with her SO, Jane, who has somehow put up with her for a quarter of a century now, and three enigmatic cats. Chief among them is Lucy, who knows the secret of the universe but isn’t letting on. When not writing, she either despairs or makes bread: specialities are focaccia and her amazing seven-strand challah. If she has any other skills, she’s yet to discover them.



Where no great story goes untold.

The variety you want to read, the stories authors have always wanted to write. With new releases every week, your next great read is just a download away!

Keep in touch with Carina Press:
Read our blog: www.CarinaPress.com/blog
Follow us on Twitter: www.twitter.com/CarinaPress
Become a fan on Facebook: www.facebook.com/CarinaPress



ISBN: 978-1-4268-9094-9

Copyright © 2010 by Harper Fox

All rights reserved. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of publisher, Harlequin Enterprises Limited, 225 Duncan Mill Road, Don Mills, Ontario, Canada M3B 3K9.

All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

This edition published by arrangement with Harlequin Books S.A.

® and ™ are trademarks of the publisher. Trademarks indicated with ® are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the Canadian Trade Marks Office and in other countries.

www.CarinaPress.com